Plays With Cars

By

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Atlanta, Georgia

For Jo, Joe, and Joe,

the only ones who didn't look at me like a home buyer walking into a 1970s-era kitchen when I said I wanted to quit my job at Porsche to be a writer.

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Introduction

I'll never forget the look on my boss's face when I told him that I planned on quitting my job to become a writer. Actually, I *can't* forget that look, because I've seen it about a thousand times since then on about a thousand different faces. It's amazing how everyone instinctively knows the look for: *You're quitting your job at Porsche to become a writer? Are you completely insane?*

Since I get this question so often in look form, I'll address it here, on the very first page. The answer is: Yes, I am completely insane. This point becomes especially clear on the days when utility bills come in the mail.

My insanity is further detailed in this book. Here, you'll read stories about buying an old Range Rover sight unseen, driving a Lotus across the United States, taking an AMG-powered Mercedes station wagon to the dragstrip, and meeting Ralph Lauren in his Bugatti Veyron. You'll also read reviews of the cars I've owned – a group that ranges from a Mercedes G-Wagen to a 2012 Volkswagen Jetta. Really, no hard feelings if you skip the Jetta review.

Of course, I know that reading about this stuff isn't as enjoyable as experiencing it firsthand. But trust me: it's way cheaper. And you don't even have to quit your job to do it.

1. Have Lotus, Will Autocross

I once took my Lotus Elise to an autocross. I didn't really *want* to do this, but as a Lotus owner I had no choice: it was either autocross or be shunned by the Lotus community, which is primarily made up of guys who wear Lotus hats and Lotus shoes even if they're going in for surgery.

I visited the autocross with two friends, Sean and David. Sean is a seasoned autocross veteran who drives a yellow BMW M3. He searched for months to find an M3 with no sunroof, only to accidentally drill a hole in the roof while installing a roll cage. Although this embarrasses Sean, I consider it proof that he's a hardcore racer, though possibly not a particularly skilled handyman.

David, meanwhile, is a fellow Elise owner. He showed up wearing a Lotus hat and Lotus shoes.

The event started at 7:30 on a Sunday morning, which – as a 23-year-old – was the earliest I had ever woken up for anything, except to contest a traffic violation in court. When we arrived, several autocrossers were already talking amongst themselves. While I thought they were complaining about the time, it turned out they were trying to one-up each other by describing the wild parties they *could've* attended last night, if only they didn't have to get up so early. This included several uses of the phrase "naw, dude."

In other words: they were competing before they even put on their

helmets.

As the pissing match over lost Saturday night plans continued ("Naw, dude, I coulda banged this super fine chick!"), I started to think the racers had a point. We were in the parking lot of Turner Field, home of the Atlanta Braves, who would be away for the next four days. *Did we really have to get there before 8 am?*

The answer, as it turned out, was: yes. Yes we did. That's because we spent the next hour listening to the Regional Director for Whatever Group This Was explain 74 different autocross rules in a tone so serious it sounded like we would soon be heading into battle to secure the continued existence of mankind. Admittedly, some rules were important, like an overview of safety protocol. But I personally believe he could've cut out at least part of his six-minute explanation on how the color on your nametag corresponds to the color on the schedule.

Once the regional director finished the driver briefing, he took questions. Of course, there were none, since he already covered everything we needed to know. This included an overview of the course, a refresher on cone etiquette, and probably a light history of Mao's China. (I say "probably" because I stopped listening after about 40 minutes and began amusing myself by sticking my finger through the hole in Sean's roof.)

With no questions and eager to get going, we all started heading in the direction of our cars, until someone in the back yelled out:

"So if my nametag is purple, where do I go?"

Ugh.

I was ready to race. Instead, Sean announced it was time for tech inspection. This involved each car being scrutinized by a 19-year-old college student with an Indian name who apparently believed that his job was roughly as important as the wings of a passenger jet during flight. Nearly everyone had an infraction, and those who tried to argue were met with the condescending look of someone who clearly knew everything, because he once swapped a B862@yA$nn7 into an EG9K Civic and put it on springs, yo.

For my Elise, it was the battery that raised the ire of the "inspector." After pawing at it for several seconds, he announced it wiggled too

much, which was probably a direct result of him wiggling it. He decided to give me a free pass – an offer he followed up with an ominous *"just today"* – but I was sternly assured it would "never fly at nationals." I had just received a fix-it ticket from a college sophomore.

As the inspector moved on to the next car, I pondered what nationals must be like. Given that my battery passed at our little regional event, *just today*, and that our regional director *only* spoke for an hour, I imagined a far-more-serious national event would be scheduled something like this:

9 a.m. - noon: Driver briefing. National director goes over entire rulebook from start to finish. No cell phones are allowed, unless you're recording the briefing to use as a bedtime story for your children.

Noon – 1 p.m.: Lunch.

1 – 5:30 p.m.: Tech inspection. No wiggling batteries, wiggling wheels or wiggling anything else. May also be a Concours d'Elegance judging.

5:30 – 6 p.m.: Actual racing, unless driver briefing and tech inspection go long. In that case, the National Autocross Championship will consist of a 50-yard-dash between the driver whose car did best in the tech inspection and the driver who paid closest attention during the briefing.

When the tech inspections finally ended, I surveyed the rest of the field. In addition to David's car and mine, the group included a few other Lotus Elises. There were also a few Porsches, a few Minis, a few Mustangs, a few Corvettes and – bizarrely – a Jaguar XK8 convertible.

"They run a Jaguar parts company," said Sean.

They'd have to.

These cars made up about half the field. The other half was comprised solely of two types vehicles. One was the E30 BMW 3-Series. There were about 20 of these, each lowered, dirty, and wearing black wheels, or possibly silver wheels coated in brake dust. I like the E30, so I approached a few owners to compliment their cars. In all cases, this led to the following response: *"Yeah, it's not*

done yet. Just gotta put a [whatever] on, and it'll be runnin' perfect."

The other popular autocrosser was, of course, the Mazda Miata. Something like 30 different Miatas were present, all in varying stages of interior removal. While each Miata looked the same to me, two Miata drivers meeting for the first time could seemingly spend an entire weekend discussing modifications to their cars. *"Oh, you chose the ABC sway bars? Hmm. I chose the XYZs. What about exhaust?"* Getting stuck in one of these conversations made me long for the driver briefing.

Next, I had to report to work. Every driver has a job to do when he isn't driving, and in my case that meant something they called "corner work." Initially, I was eager to get my work out of the way so I could focus solely on driving. But after a few minutes, I realized I *actually* wanted to be as far away from the autocross as humanly possible.

Corner work, as it turns out, means picking up cones downed by competitors. This is a grueling task in which you stand completely alone in the empty parking lot with the Atlanta summer heat radiating off the asphalt. Every few minutes, a car comes by and knocks over a cone, which means you have to sprint to the downed cone, set it up, and run away before the next car comes by and knocks it over again. This goes on for hours.

And I mean *hours*. Each car got around four passes. I don't know how many cars there were, but anecdotally I believe it may have numbered in the tens of zillions. I also believe it was the clear mission of nearly every driver to knock over as many cones as possible. The worst part was that only about six drivers were novices: the rest were just cruel

bastards, apparently eager to make the corner workers run as much as possible.

Eventually, just as I couldn't take any more sun or the sight of another cone flying out from under another E30, my group was called to drive. I walked to the staging area and downed two bottled waters. Between the driver briefing, the tech inspection, and the first stage, my autocrossing career was now three and a half hours old – and I had yet to sit in a car.

Fortunately, I was up next for track time. Being a novice, I was paired up with an experienced driver, Jason, who sat in the passenger seat to guide me. This was surprisingly helpful, because *I had absolutely no idea what I was doing*. This became clear when Jason actually had to yell "SHIFT!" when I bounced off the redline in the first turn.

The first two runs went reasonably well. I pushed the car hard, turned in the right places, and accelerated smoothly out of corners. I was proud of my times, mostly because I was a few seconds ahead of David – a fact I chalked up to exceptional driving skill derived from years of hard-fought racing in *Gran Turismo* for PlayStation. Sean later informed me it was because I had better tires.

For the third lap, Jason suggested I let him drive so I could see how to make up a second or two. I handed him the key, and off we went.

About 60 seconds later, our lap was done. My smug satisfaction from beating David's time by a couple of seconds was gone: Jason beat *my* time by an unthinkable ten seconds. Now, ten seconds might not seem like much. But when you're racing in a parking lot, it's the difference between a modified Miata driven by a pro and the guy with the pickup who got there early and set up the cones.

Now aware of what my Elise could do, I took one more crack at it, this time without Jason. That was by design: I didn't need him anymore. I now knew *exactly* where to turn, and how to turn, and when to accelerate, and with his weight gone, I would *obviously* shave several seconds off my time. *I WOULD BE AN AUTOCROSS GOD!*

It turns out an abundance of confidence isn't the best thing for the track – a fact I discovered about halfway into my lap as I sat in the middle of the track facing the opposite direction. I drove too hard and oversteered, which is a challenging thing in a mid-engine car like the Lotus. I turned around, got back on the track, and finished my worst

lap of the day.

We left the event by 1 p.m. As I drove home, still wondering why we had to get there so early, I thought back on the morning. Five and a half hours of “autocrossing” netted me a sunburn and three sixty-second laps, one of which was wasted due to my spin. I decided my autocrossing career was probably over. But I was now an official member of the Lotus community – and I didn’t even have a Lotus hat or shoes.

2. Honda LaneWatch Is Really Cool

I recently made a troubling discovery. Samsung, noted manufacturer of telephones the size of a license plate, is now producing a refrigerator with Twitter. Let me repeat that for those of you who merely skim my articles (Hi, mom!). Samsung manufacturers a *refrigerator* with Twitter.

The refrigerator's screen (which also includes other similarly useless apps) is located just above where you get ice. This is highly convenient. Primarily, it's convenient for Samsung, who will gladly charge you thousands of dollars to replace the screen when you get it wet. But it's also convenient for you, the refrigerator operator, since it allows you to get ice and tweet: *I just got ice. #cold #drink #icerocks2013 #yourdrinkiswarmerthanmine*

I know what you're thinking: *Is this going to be about cars?* And the answer is: only sort of. At this point, you're more than forgiven if you'd rather see what's on TV today. (Bye, mom!)

The theme of all this is that technology is coming, whether you like it or not. I still remember, years ago, thinking "yeah, right!" when I heard they were going to put cameras in cell phones. Now, I can use my phone to take a photo of my iced drink, tweet the photo, and then *re-tweet* it using my refrigerator. (No, I have no idea how Twitter works.)

Of course, technology's ever-expanding reach is also affecting modern cars. The best example of this is Toyota's Entune navigation system, which you can now use to get movie reviews, buy movie tickets, and make restaurant reservations. According to Toyota, this does not lead to distracted driving, an assertion which is apparently believed by the NHTSA and no one else.

Hyundai Blue Link offers a far creepier take on infotainment. Yes, you can do the normal stuff, like use Pandora and re-tweet your twitters (or something). But you can *also* set up a geographical perimeter and receive text messages every time the car leaves it. This is a wonderful idea pitched as a benefit to families with young drivers, though it will almost exclusively be used by people with cheating spouses.

Blue Link can also send you a text message every time the car exceeds a certain speed. This one actually *is* brilliant, since it allows you to

confront your spouse about where he went *and how fast he got there*. Imagine the court transcript: *"Defendant was tracked to Stacy's home on Thursday, May 9, using Hyundai Blue Link. Defendant travelled there at 87 miles per hour."* #busted!!

Beyond infotainment, we have to contend with new technology in other areas. Take, for example, BMW's latest turn signal mechanism. Here's how it works: you press the signal. Then it pops back into the normal position. So you try to cancel it by pressing it the *other* way, which causes the *other* signal to turn on. Eventually, you're killed in a fiery crash as you try and figure out how the hell the turn signal works. BMW is not totally opposed to this, since it means you can no longer complain on the JD Power surveys.

Personally, I'm of the belief that we don't really need any new technology in the world of turn signals. That's because every car in the history of the automobile has used pretty much the same system, and it works quite well. But there's one new feature that's really gotten me excited: Honda LaneWatch.

LaneWatch is standard on all Accords above the EX trim level, which is all the Accords you'd buy, because you're not a cheap bastard, *am I right?* Here's how it works: first, you press the right turn signal. Immediately afterwards, a camera turns on that displays literally every single thing on the right side of your vehicle. Seriously: when I'm in Atlanta heading north, the camera shows the next lane, the neighborhood to my right, the next county, and – if I'm on a slight incline – most of the Atlantic Ocean.

I recently had a Honda Accord press car with LaneWatch, and I was so impressed by the feature that I didn't use the passenger mirror once throughout the entirety of my time with the car. This is pretty cool: a camera that *completely takes the place* of a side-view mirror. Concept cars have teased the idea for years, but here I was actually experiencing it in a $25,000 Honda Accord!

Where LaneWatch *does* become gimmicky is that you can turn it on and monitor things without the turn signal activated. While this can be enjoyable, it's possibly the only thing more distracting than using your touchscreen to buy movie tickets. Still, when used for its intended purpose, LaneWatch is tremendously helpful. The picture's clear, it's aimed exactly where you want, and – to help you decide if it's safe to change lanes – it even displays three different on-screen lines: Green, Yellow, and BMW Driver.

When I gave back the Accord and returned to my LaneWatch-less SUV, I began to realize just how much technology is missing from my life. So I did the only rational thing I could think of: I drove straight to the store and joined the 21st century. And I love it. *This message was sent from my refrigerator.*

3. 2009 Nissan Cube – Review

Today's topic is: things that are shaped like a box. Examples include my DVD player, shipping containers, and, most importantly, an actual box.

You – an astute individual who is currently reading this book on an airplane because the WiFi is out – will note that not one of these things has wheels. There's a reason for that: because we don't want them rolling away.

Imagine, for instance, if my DVD player rolled away. That would be really annoying. Every time I wanted to watch a movie, I would have to look everywhere for my DVD player, until I discovered it on the porch hanging out with a shipping container.

So we don't put wheels on boxes, and we don't put boxes on wheels, and we're generally pretty happy unless we're the DVD player, which is constantly looking outside and wishing it could explore the world.

But there's an exception to all this wheeled box talk: the Nissan Cube, which is, in fact, a box on wheels. It also happens to be one of my current vehicles. Really. And I occasionally drive it in a multi-step process that involves:

1. Getting inside.
2. Turning the key.
3. Pressing the accelerator.
4. Shielding my face from anyone who might see me.

If you want to know how a Nissan Cube drives – or why someone might buy it – you've come to the right place.

A Brief History of Cube

Let's start with some history. To do that, we'll go back to 1999. Back then, we lived in a world of cars that weren't boxes. Acura wasn't making vehicles that looked like pissed-off birds of prey, General Motors was building the Monte Carlo *and* the Astro, as if to say: "*C'mon, bankruptcy. You'll never catch us!"* and Justin Bieber's voice was roughly identical to how it is now, even though he was only five. In other words: it was a simpler time.

Then the box cars started appearing.

First, they showed up in Japan. This surprised no one because tons of weird things happen in Japan, such as tentacle porn. So we ignored it and tried to go about our daily routines, which involved driving very sleek, normal-looking cars to our offices, which also happened to be boxes and were certainly not on wheels unless we were an ice cream guy.

But the box cars soon started spreading to the US, where they caught on rapidly. And by "rapidly" what I really mean is that recently divorced women in their mid-40s were all over these things, because they thought a car shaped like a box would be *kooky*.

So middle-aged women started buying the Scion xB, which generally ensured that no one else would touch it. Before long, a second box car came out: the Honda Element, which not only found favor among 40-year-old women, but also men who were apparently comfortable with the idea that half of their vehicle's exterior was *an entirely different color* than the other half.

But then Nissan threw down the gauntlet with the Cube, a box car so ugly that it managed to send 40-year-old women running away from box cars forever, and instead towards a wide variety of Subaru products.

OK, So Why Do You Have One?

This is a fair question, so I will answer it in the only way I know how: hyperbole and lies.

No, seriously, there's a legitimate reason, and it doesn't even involve the words "I paid for it." Instead, my brother paid for it, at my recommendation, because he wanted a car he could use to advertise his business. The Cube is perfect for that. I know this because when I see a Cube, my first reaction is: *This person probably runs a high-quality business.*

Anyway, my brother eventually moved to Hollywood and decided – completely rationally – that he did not want to be seen in California driving a Nissan Cube. So the Cube found its way into my hands, and I keep it around, largely because I cannot find anyone willing to take it.

Now that we've covered all of that, on to the review.

Exterior

The Cube's exterior was undoubtedly designed by a talented team of engineers, stylists, and marketers, presumably during a long, multi-lingual conference call. This is the only possible explanation for several of the Cube's features. For instance: "make it look good" probably translated to "give it an enormous bottom lip," which is why the front bumper sticks out roughly the same distance as a police car's push bar.

The exterior's most distinctive feature is a wraparound rear window, which was intended to make the Cube look like a chic, modern car. Unfortunately, these thoughts are dispelled the moment you lay eyes on the hubcaps, which look like something Chrysler would've rejected in the 1990s. (And, folks, Chrysler wasn't rejecting *anything* in the 1990s, except for cars that looked like boxes.)

There is, however, a silver lining: the Cube's styling is really good for fuel economy. I know what you're thinking: *It's a box! Fuel economy is probably horrible! And my 1990s Chrysler is way better than your Cube!* You are, of course, wrong on all counts. You see, the styling is good for fuel economy because, faced with the possibility of being seen in the Cube, I usually make my girlfriend drive her car instead. The result is that I only fill up the Cube every three or four weeks.

Interior

In many strange-looking vehicles, the exterior is much more unusual than the interior. Not so in the Cube, where he headliner is rippled, presumably after the designer got high (this part is definitely true) and, faced with the munchies, decided to pay homage to the Lays potato chip (this part is probably true). Also: there is a cupholder to the *left* of the steering wheel, which has no explanation except preventing your passengers from stealing your drink.

But the Cube's strangest interior feature is a piece of shag carpeting on the dashboard, referred to affectionately by Cube owners as the "Cube pubes." At first glance, this appears to be a place for you to rest your sunglasses so they won't roll around. But there's actually a label underneath the shag carpeting that says: "WARNING: DO NOT PLACE ANYTHING ON THIS PRODUCT." In other words, it's there purely for style.

Folks: A piece of shag carpeting. On the dashboard. *For style.*

The other interior problem with my particular Cube is that, even after five car washes, it still smells like my brother's dog, no matter how many times I tell my passengers "it's probably you."

Driving Experience

This is where the Cube surprises. You look at it from the outside and wonder: *Who the hell would buy one of these?* You get inside and think: *Does a dog own this vehicle?* And then you turn the key, you put up your hand to shield your face, and you think: *This isn't so bad!*

And, really, it isn't. Acceleration is strong for a vehicle that has both a CVT and approximately the same horsepower rating as my neighbor's radial saw. Handling is surprisingly sharp, considering the Cube resembles a school bus with a fat lip. Even braking is impressive. I chalk all this up to the fact that Nissan also builds the GT-R, and the technology has clearly trickled down to its lesser models, such as the Murano CrossCabriolet.

Beyond driving, the Cube is also incredibly practical. Put the seats down and you can get whatever you want in the thing. Based on the smell, for instance, mine once hosted a competition to see how many dogs fit inside a Nissan Cube.

In Conclusion

So the Cube is a weird-looking car with a weird-looking interior. You have to shield yourself as you drive down the road, and you endure constant teasing from your passengers about the shag carpeting. But it's cheap, practical, and decent to drive, so, in the end, I recommend it. Now can someone please come take mine?

4. Tale of the Dragon

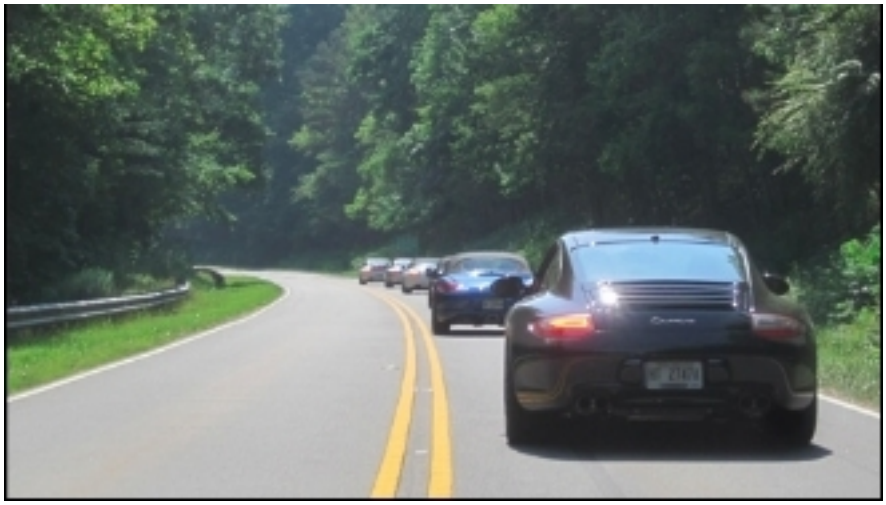
Some guys wash their cars, some guys drive their cars. That's an old saying among automotive enthusiasts, or maybe I made it up. But since I consider myself a part of the latter category, I jumped at the chance to drive my dirty 911 Cabriolet with a group of other Porsche owners at the Tail of the Dragon.

For those who don't know what the Tail of the Dragon is, a little background. Nestled in the marry-your-cousin hills of Tennessee, TotD (that's what guys who own modified GTIs call it) is a ridiculously curvy road that's just like every other ridiculously curvy road except that it's absolutely in the middle of nowhere. Internet? No. Phones? Not really. When the iPod came out, this area was just starting to get really pissed off about New Coke.

Car enthusiasts and motorcyclists alike are drawn to the Tail of the Dragon. Part of the allure is that it's far from everything. There are no annoyances, such as wives, or girlfriends, or Instagram users.

But the main attraction is the road itself, which boasts "318 curves in 11 miles." This is an unusually precise display of local pride in a place where directions typically sound like: *"Go down to Davey's mailbox and swing a left, and if Mister Jones don't come out, then he's probably at Peggy's!"*

Being car enthusiasts, my Porsche friends and I wanted to check out The Tail for ourselves. So we met up in a North Atlanta parking lot and began the three-hour trek in a brightly colored convoy that probably looked like Skittles being carried away from a picnic by ants. It also looked like a rolling target for the police, a problem our lead driver compounded by cruising at around 100 miles per hour. But being real men, we had to follow or risk abandonment and shame. And so we did, except when we needed bathroom breaks.



Fortunately, the police left us alone, and we soon reached our hotel. It was entirely made of logs, which I theorized was not an attempt to provide a "rustic feel," but rather because word of new construction materials had not yet reached the area. We could tell that nearby property owners with houses made of sod were highly jealous.

There were no surprises inside the hotel. Deer head on the wall? Check. Wood table with legs that look like tree trunks? Of course. Tacky fishing-related signs with sayings like: "The trout and nothing but the trout, so help me cod"? *Do you even have to ask?* Clearly, the hotel owners raided a catalog entitled *Stereotypical Rustic Log Cabin Décor*. We know they didn't visit the website.

We were greeted on the front porch by the hotel's staff, which consisted entirely of two middle-aged women who appeared to keep reservations entirely in their heads. They remembered ours – the next group wasn't so lucky – and gave us a brief tour of the property, which included a private dock with a pontoon boat on a gorgeous mountain lake. Being car guys, this didn't matter: we wanted to *drive*. As the women explained the area's attractions, we started guessing the horsepower of the boat.

Before long, we were back in our Porsches and headed towards the actual Tail of the Dragon. This, dear reader, leads me to offer a rare moment of factual honesty. You've probably heard considerable hype in the automotive and motorcycle world about this area of the country. You've probably heard this place offers some of the best driving roads in the world. You've probably heard that it's a gearhead's paradise. Well, you've heard right.

Seriously: all of the roads are spectacular. It doesn't matter if you're on the Tail of the Dragon, the Cherohala Skyway, or some other road that sounds like a place Harry Potter might wake up with his lightning bolt scar throbbing. The twists, the turns, the elevation changes: it's like the American Nurburgring, except with better weather and the occasional tractor-trailer hauling pigs.

In fact, I think I'll sum it up with a cliché worthy of a seasoned automotive journalist who just doesn't give a damn anymore: *driving here makes you feel like a professional, with every corner urging you to further examine the depths of your car's limits.* (Did you like that one?) Really, the roads are fantastic. So fantastic you might forget that, at any moment, you could be hit with an errant bullet fired by toothless rednecks shooting empty beer cans.

So we drove. *A lot.* We drove, and we drove, and we drove. We passed a group of Dodge Viper owners chatting on the side of the road, presumably because the most fun you can have with a Viper is looking at it. We were repeatedly passed by dozens of highly skilled motorcyclists – so skilled, in fact, that there's a tree dedicated to their achievements on the North Carolina side of "The Dragon." And we passed Killboy, a local photographer who takes pictures from a folding chair on the side of the highway and sells his images online.

After three or four hours of hard driving – my arm actually hurt from all the shifting – we stopped for fuel and water. It was there that we received a prophetic warning from a sunburned good ol' boy who appeared to have been sitting on the gas station's porch since the Clinton presidency:

"All dem dat Tennessee na dem dere poh-leece dat dem nah ah dem dere."

Although we were frightened by the word "police," the rest of the man's remarks were utterly unintelligible. An attempt to get him to repeat his words yielded the same results, so we thanked him for the unsolicited advice and returned to our vehicles.

We were finally ready to call it quits two hours later, exhausted from more than six hours on the road. We headed towards the hotel – driving reasonably for the first time since Atlanta – and plotted a steady, relaxed course. So when we saw the Chevy Tahoe coming towards us with a roof-mounted light bar and police markings on the doors, we thought we were OK.

We were wrong.

As soon as our group passed by, the Tahoe flipped a U-turn. Lights and sirens came on, and Nick – the last member of our group – was immediately pulled over. A text message from Gary, a group member who stayed out for some extra driving, revealed that he, too, had been stopped. And so, like the well-intentioned, caring people Porsche owners are known to be, we left them behind and returned to our hotel to have dinner on the lake.

And then: *"They want everyone to come back,"* said a text message from Nick. Apparently our phones couldn't get service to call home, but they worked just fine if we were getting in trouble. We didn't know what to do, but *boy, these ribs sure are good*. One of the hotel's owners was making them as she knocked back much of the alcohol supply.

The food took our minds off the cops until Nick's Boxster arrived at the hotel. It was followed seconds later by three police cars. *The bastard ratted us out!*

Moments later, the hotel's other owner came running down to the dock where we were eating.

"The police are here, and they want to talk to you guys," she said in a grandmotherly southern accent. I was surprised she was so sharp considering all the reservations she had floating around in her head. "You have two options. You can go up and get tickets, or you can get on the boat, and we can tell them to go rot."

What?

"We can take you out on the boat," she said. "We'll tell them you're out on the lake and we don't know when you'll be back, and we'll just let them rot up there."

Our group decided this would be better than whatever the cops had planned, since – although Nick had returned, ticket in hand – Gary was still nowhere to be found. I had visions of spending the night in Hee-Haw County Jail, where they arrest people for things like falling asleep in church and possession of an Obama bumper sticker. (Both crimes, by the way, are punishable by counting how many curves there are on local roads.)

Unfortunately, the desk clerk would be returning to her post in the hotel. Our boat would instead be driven by the rib cook, who had consumed more beers that night than our entire group. Still: *it was better than being arrested.*

We jumped in the boat and the woman fired it up, which caused the same response that starting a boat *always* provokes: spiders. In particular, an enormous spider near the driver's seat. And not just any spider, like a medium-sized one you might find in your house, or a huge one that's on display in a zoo and survives on house cats. This was the largest spider I have ever seen.

It quickly crawled out from under the driver's seat, where it had probably laid thousands of tiny spider eggs that would soon hatch, revealing baby spiders that would eat us. Panicked, our group looked around for something to kill the spider, such as a baseball bat, or possibly Nick. This provoked a stunning response from our drunken boat captain:

"Don't kill the spider," she said, sounding like a dialect coach on the set of *Fried Green Tomatoes*. "I *laahk* the spider!"

She *laahks* the spider.

Meeting with the cops suddenly seemed preferable to riding on the boat. We were on a rural lake, far from medical services, under the care of a drunk woman who insisted that we spare the life of a giant, angry-looking spider.

The spider retreated underneath a seat as we went further out on the lake, presumably to vomit due to our captain's boating skills. A few seconds later, a phone rang. That's right: in a land without cell phones, the Internet, air conditioning or Dippin' Dots, there was a telephone on a pontoon boat. It had a cord.

After a short conversation, the boat's tipsy captain announced: "We have to head back or they'll start towing. But the police only want to talk to the drivers of the blue cars."

This, of course, included me. My Aqua Blue Metallic 911, which had sparked countless attempts at car-to-car flirtation from the gay men of Atlanta, had screwed me over. The other blue car driver was Peter, my boss, a Portuguese man who stays at Ritz-Carltons, vacations on the French Riviera, always wears button-down shirts, and speaks four

languages. In other words: I would have to do all of the talking.

After returning to the dock, Peter and I made our way to the hotel's parking lot. The police were waiting with a marked Dodge Durango and an all-black Jeep Grand Cherokee with a barking German Shepherd in the back.

"Were you driving the blue cars?" said the police officer, whose size and shape could've earned him work as a snowman in one of those movies where inanimate objects come to life and sing.

"Well, we were all switching cars," I said, repeating a plan we had concocted on the boat. *If they didn't see us driving the cars, how could they give us tickets?*

"Who was driving the blue cars about 20 minutes ago, back on the Skyway?"

"I don't know, officer. We were rotating cars. It could've been anyone."

"Well, here's what happened. I was driving back there on the Skyway, and one of the blue cars ran me off the road. I'm going to give you both tickets."

"Do you know which blue car it was?" I asked.

"Nope. Gonna have to cite you both."

"But we don't even know if was one of us driving," I protested.

"No, I don't. But here's what I can do. I can either cite the two of you, or cite your entire group. Your choice."

That's right: the officer admitted only *one* of the blue cars "ran him off the road." He also admitted he had no idea who was driving. Could've been me. Could've been Peter. Could've been an entirely different group of Porsche enthusiasts, or maybe even a toothless local who came into riches by taking out a fat insurance policy on his wife and accidentally killing her during a beer can shooting contest. But he was going to give us tickets anyway.

Still, I didn't force the issue, primarily because the police dog was angrily barking inside the Jeep.

After a few minutes, the officer returned with our driver's licenses and our tickets. We were cited for "Unsafe Movement," an offense that carries zero license points and a $150 fine. While "running a police officer off the road" would probably result in jail time somewhere else, I imagine he chose this charge because he knew we wouldn't be back to contest it.

When Peter and I rejoined our counterparts on the dock – a group that now included Gary, who received the same citation – everyone was talking about "asshole" cops, draconian enforcement of traffic laws and police officers who act as revenue generators. These are the Android versus iPhone conversations of the car guy world.

But a few days later, I realized something that put the experience into an entirely new light. We paid $150 for six hours of flat-out driving on stunning roads with no traffic. That's a better deal than a track day at Road Atlanta. And with that knowledge happily in my mind, I paid my fine online and vowed to return next year – only this time, with a different-colored car. And probably without Nick.

5. 1993 Mercedes-Benz 500E – Review

I've decided to review my Mercedes 500E. This opening sentence has caused 99 percent of you to yawn, or nod off, or frantically search for something that isn't about a Mercedes sedan with an automatic transmission. (*"Honey, do we have any junk mail?"*) But Mercedes fans comprise the remaining one percent, and they're really excited.

Just like Congress, I'll address the one percent first. To you, I say: *don't get your hopes up.* I've spent days trying to write something, anything, that is marginally interesting about this car, and so far I've come up absolutely empty. Really: you'd be surprised just how much cleaning you can get done when the assignment is *"write interesting things about a Mercedes sedan."*

The reason for this is obvious: it's a Mercedes sedan. Mercedes sedans appeal to the kind of people who believe AOL is the best way to access the Internet. They're boring. They're old. They're not funny. (I can't remember at this point if I'm referring to the people or the Mercedes sedans.)

But this hasn't stopped Mercedes from repeatedly trying to find younger buyers, as I've illustrated in the following timeline:

1953: The E-Class is introduced. The first customer walks into the showroom and announces: *"Can I get a senior citizen discount?"*

1961: The E-Class is redesigned with tail fins. By now, tail fins are decidedly uncool. Young people stay away, but old people flock to the design, saying things like: *"Golly, Harold, aren't these tail fins nice?"* Harold agrees they are. Today, you can reach Harold by e-mail at: haroldtailfins@aol.com.

1968: The E-Class is redesigned again, now featuring a Mercedes tradition that would last for decades: an enormous grille. The 1960s youth is largely unmoved, but old people buy the car in huge numbers because they can show off their grille badges.

1976: Another E-Class redesign. Young people again fail to notice, as they're too busy making things out of hemp.

1985: With the latest E-Class, Mercedes has given up any hope of attracting young buyers. At this point, they begin concentrating solely on their two largest markets: German taxi drivers, and sub-Saharan Africans who will buy the E-Class when German taxi drivers are finished.

2006: Long after giving up on the young buyer, Mercedes debuts the boldly styled CLS. Young people quickly take note before returning to mind-numbing desk jobs in order to pay off six-figure student loan debt.

So the E-Class isn't exactly exciting. But the 500E is one of the coolest E-Class models: a high-performance collector car that's revered by about 80 guys who know what it is, and completely ignored by everyone else. I know this because when people saw mine, they excitedly announced: "*Cool car! I think I've seen these at the Frankfurt Airport taxi stand!"*

If you're part of the "everyone else," allow me to clue you in. In the late 1980s, Mercedes wanted to put a large engine into its E-Class sedan, presumably because some young product planner woke up one morning and thought: *THIS IS WHAT WILL ATTRACT YOUNGER BUYERS!* At the same time, Porsche was in dire financial straits because they spent the prior 20 years building approximately the same three vehicles, which were starting to become outclassed by medium-sized construction equipment.

So the two worked together: Mercedes hired Porsche to engineer and build the 500E. But Mercedes would still produce the engines and the bodies. This resulted in a complicated process that could only be

devised by Germans, which went as follows:

1. Mercedes builds the pieces.
2. Mercedes ships the pieces to Porsche.
3. Porsche puts the body together at its factory.
4. Porsche ships the car to Mercedes.
5. Mercedes paints and rust-proofs the car.
6. Mercedes ships the car back to Porsche.
7. Porsche assembles everything.
8. Porsche ships the assembled product back to Mercedes.
9. Mercedes puts on the finishing touches.
10. Mercedes ships the car to its dealers.

This is all true. Each 500E took approximately 18 days to build, of which about 14 were probably spent in some state of near-completion on the back of a truck. By comparison, a Jetta takes around thirty seconds to build, and it doesn't see the back of a truck until it breaks down four days after you buy it.

Anyway: the 500E has a pretty cool history, though you'd never know that from looking at it. That's because the 500E looks like every single other E-Class of its day, with only minor revisions. But because of that history – and its engine – car guys pay big money for it.

I wasn't one of those car guys. I bought my pristine, 72,000-mile black 500E from a local Fiat dealer who took it as a trade-in – along with a boat trailer – on a new Fiat 500. I know what you're thinking: *What kind of a person trades a Porsche-built, V8-powered Mercedes on a Fiat 500?* The answer is: I have no idea. But I bet he went home and bragged about it on an AOL chat room.

Speaking of no idea, the Fiat dealer thought the 500E was just a regular E-Class, so I bought it for virtually nothing without negotiating. As I drove it home, I found all of the original service records wedged in the glovebox.

Of course, we've now reached the point in the review where I must tell you about the driving experience. This is a crucial part of a car review, unless you're writing for one of the car magazines. In that case, you can spend the entire review bringing up childhood anecdotes. (*"To really understand the new Buick Verano, I had to think back to my uncle's '65 Buick Electra. Boy, I loved my uncle. Unfortunately, he was murdered by drug dealers who drove a Buick Somerset. Ahh, the Somerset…"*)

The 500E is always a topic of great interest to Mercedes enthusiasts. When they find out I've owned one, their eyes get wide, their breathing gets short (this might be due to high blood pressure), and they say: "*Oh my God! How was it?"* And here's the answer I always give: when you pressed the accelerator, it went. When you pressed the brake, it stopped. When you turned the wheel, it turned. There's not much more to it.

Really: it wasn't particularly remarkable. It was very solid, like you'd expect from a car built by dozens of Germans in a complicated, multi-step process. It was quick. It handled well. But it was no exotic sports car.

People are sometimes sad to hear that – but I remind them it wasn't the performance that made the 500E so great. It was the history, the Porsche connection, the rear bucket seats, the subtle body modifications, and the car-guy exclusive appeal. And all of that is far more enduring that performance. It's almost enough to make a young person give it a second look.

6. No, I Won't Recommend a Car For You

I, like you, am a car enthusiast. The difference is that while you surely have some sort of exciting rear-wheel drive sports car, I have a Nissan Cube, which is the world's only car with dashboard-mounted shag carpeting.

Despite Cube ownership, I still get to enjoy the perks of being a car enthusiast. This primarily consists of being able to tell the difference between an unmarked police car and an old person driving slowly. Also, I can always pick out an Infiniti G35 based on its engine note, which is highly impressive to anyone nearby, provided they aren't female.

But there are some drawbacks to the car hobby. Namely: as the "car expert," you constantly have to deal with car-illiterate friends and family, who ask questions like: *"My car is making a funny noise. How much will it cost to fix?"*

I've learned over the years that telling people you can't diagnose a problem from a "funny noise" leads to the retort: *"I thought you knew everything about cars*." So I now explain that because they have an Audi, it will be around $1,500. After several years of Audi ownership, I'm quite sure this is the same pricing strategy the dealer uses.

But the "funny noise" question is nothing compared to the most dreaded words a car enthusiast can hear. No, I'm not talking about "I saw you racing," as stated by a state trooper at 1 am on the highway shoulder. I am instead referring to the much, much worse: *"What car should I get?"*

I, probably like you, am asked by friends for car recommendations on a constant basis. So I, probably like you, provide earnest, helpful advice listing several reliable, practical cars that fit within the friend's parameters. I, probably like you, explain the pros and cons and give the friend my thoughts on each car's driving experience. And then, I, probably like you, am completely ignored while the friend buys a Volkswagen Beetle Cabriolet.

Truly: this happens all the time. So frequently, in fact, that I now have a standard reply when people ask me for car advice, which is: *"You know I have a Nissan Cube, right?"* This is a great deterrent. It usually stops people from asking my advice on cars, or restaurants, or

hotels, or, in some cases, from talking to me at all, which gives me far more time to sit on my porch and nap in an ongoing effort to write these stories.

But Cube ownership doesn't always deter people. As a result, I must occasionally provide actual advice, even though I know my suggestions will be ignored in favor of a Beetle Cabriolet. That's because, without question, the person asking will fit into at least one of the following three Categories of Car Advice Askers:

1. People who have already made their decision. I believe that at least half of the people who contact me have already made their car decision and simply want me, a bona fide car expert who once crashed a Panamera, to reinforce it.

Unfortunately, this often involves an opening line such as *"What do you think of the Aveo?"* which can only be answered with laughter, or possibly a long, consistent stream of vomit. But if you, the bona fide car expert, do *not* reinforce their decision, then you're met with…

2. People who think you're the expert, then decide you're not. This one is also incredibly common and typically goes like this:

Me: *I think a base Mini Cooper with 90,000 miles, a rebuilt title, and an automatic transmission probably isn't the best decision.*
Car Advice Asker: *Well I found a Car & Driver from 2004 that says it's really amazing, so I'm going to go with that.*
Me: *Good idea. Did I mention I have a Nissan Cube?*

I've discovered that you're only an expert if you agree with peoples' pre-conceived notions. For example: telling a baby boomer that American cars *are* reliable has approximately the same effect as announcing that you were recently abducted by aliens and released only after providing a detailed, hand-drawn roadmap of the greater Houston area.

By challenging pre-conceived notions, you have suddenly lost all credibility, and you cannot gain it back, although this will not stop them from continuing to ask for your advice. This is especially true of parents, which leads us to…

3. People who have more money than they say. If you've ever tried to provide car advice to someone under 25, you've encountered this. It usually starts when I'm approached by someone who has a

$2,000 budget for a car. This results in me giving detailed advice like: *for God's sake, make sure it includes a steering wheel.*

Actually, in these cases, I usually visit Craigslist and search for listings I think will be especially helpful. I point out common trouble spots. I mention things to stay away from. And then I discover, three months later, that the person is driving a brand-new Prius. The reason: once parents realize the kind of crap that's available on their kid's $2,000 budget, they usually step in with lots of a) cash, and b) pre-conceived notions. This, I believe, is how Toyota remains in the car business.

Of course, occasionally, someone actually does follow my advice. My brother, for example, bought a Nissan Cube on my recommendation two years ago. But he quickly grew to hate it, which is why I'm driving it now. In other words: maybe I'm not such an expert after all. If only that would stop my friends from calling me when their Beetle Cabriolet is making a funny noise.

7. Buying a 500-Horsepower Station Wagon

Part 1: Finding It

I recently sold my Porsche to buy a station wagon. This won't shock any car enthusiast, since it's outlined in our unspoken creed: eventually, we must trade our beloved sports cars for something that can haul our children and whatever large, expensive musical instrument they've recently decided to learn.

But the swap came early for me: at 23 years old, single and childless, I sacrificed my Porsche for a mommy mobile. If this shocks you, you're not alone. Weeks before the switch, I met a man at a party who proclaimed he was into cars. When I announced my plans, he became visibly disgusted and walked away. This actually occurred.

But he didn't get it. Most people didn't get it. My wagon of choice wasn't a typical daycare taxi, but rather a 2007 Mercedes E63 AMG, which is named like a Blu-Ray player but powered by a 507-horsepower V8. When it came out, it had more grunt than nearly every Italian exotic on the market. It also had a rear-facing third-row seat in the back. No, I wasn't a dad yet, or a dog owner. I didn't even have a large plant. But *I had to have this car.*

There was just one problem: Mercedes correctly predicted there wouldn't be a long line of consumers beating down dealership doors to get their hands on a $94,000 station wagon that gets 13 miles to the gallon. So they made just 153 units for the US market over an entire three-year span, or roughly the same number of Camrys that

Toyota sells in three hours.

In other words: finding an E63 wagon would be a challenge. That's particularly true in my hometown of Atlanta, where the car culture is a mix between Pyongyang (where everyone drives Chinese cars) and Venice (where everyone drives boats), but with way more Escalades.

I started with AutoTrader.com, which calls itself "the ultimate automotive marketplace." Unfortunately, I can't verify this claim because Wikipedia doesn't have a page entitled "List of Automotive Marketplaces by Ultimateness," though it does have one called "List of Danish Football Transfers, Summer 2008," which I can't imagine is any more useful.

But even AutoTrader's ultimateness didn't turn up an E63 wagon. There weren't even any listings for the E55 wagon, which came out a few years earlier and made do with a paltry 469 horsepower. I visited rival sites like cars.com, which doesn't boast about the size of its online marketplace, and Craigslist, which doesn't boast about anything. Still no E63 wagons. I was dismayed, but I wasn't going to let the rarity stop me. *I had to have this car.*

Getting desperate, I turned to an online forum for Mercedes enthusiasts, which is a lot like an online forum for BMW enthusiasts except the average user actually owns a car and isn't a 14-year-old providing his opinion on the joys of "M Power."

It turned out the forums were even more obsessed than I was with finding a good AMG wagon. They had a long discussion on the topic with hundreds of replies. They knew every car, every VIN and every color scheme. And they displayed their knowledge whenever a new car came up for sale. Posters would say things like: *"Oh, that's Jim's old car,"* or *"I can't believe that one's for sale again."* Some of them even had children to place in those rear-facing third-row seats, presumably with expensive musical instruments to match.

I was intimidated. But almost immediately, I was consumed by an entirely different feeling: competition. *I had to have this car*, dammit, and I wasn't going to let a bunch of Rain Man wannabes on a Mercedes forum take it away from me.

Determined, I returned to AutoTrader.com and set up a search alert to notify me the moment an AMG station wagon was listed. I had specific preferences, namely that the car should be somewhere near

Atlanta, black or silver on the outside, and black inside. Also, I required a clean Carfax, a long service history, and a clean title. But I couldn't be too picky, as I was doing battle with the entire Mercedes forum. And *I had to have this car.*

It didn't take long before AutoTrader proved its ultimateness. As I sat in a boring meeting with lots of charts, my phone buzzed to reveal a newly listed E63 wagon. I examined the particulars. They were:

1. The private seller took about four pictures, apparently with the same camera used to document Iwo Jima.

2. The wagon wasn't local, but rather nine hours away in Indianapolis.

3. It was the very worst color combination: a drab gray interior with an exterior color called "pewter" but later described very accurately to me as "Jewish Racing Gold."

4. The seller said nothing about service records, and he didn't mention the VIN.

In other words: the car didn't match a single one of my criteria. I left the meeting and called immediately.

"I'm calling about your E63 wagon on AutoTrader," I said.

"Oh, yeah! That!" said the man who answered, sounding as if he had completely forgotten that he was trying to sell his car, or that he had a car in the first place.

"I was wondering if you had the VIN number."

"I don't, but I think my assistant might. I'm in Dallas waiting to catch a plane to Hawaii. I'll have her pull it up."

This should've been the first sign of trouble. Who lists a car for sale before taking a trip to Hawaii? And who lists a car without the VIN?

The good news was I had beaten the Mercedes forum people to the punch. The seller agreed to have his assistant send along the VIN and insisted that the car was actually silver, *not* pewter. We hung up, and the VIN came within an hour. I sent it to a co-worker with connections to a Mercedes dealer where we could pull the service

history.

Another warning sign came the second I looked at the service records, which confirmed the car was pewter, *not* silver. While this may have stopped a normal used car buyer, I dismissed it as proof that Roy, the car's owner, was probably either colorblind or an idiot. And I already knew the latter was true, since he listed the car right before a two-week vacation.

I quickly decided I could live with the AARP discount hue if the car was in good shape. After all, with only 153 made, the likelihood of finding another E63 wagon was about the same as turning to the Bruce Springsteen XM channel and hearing an actual Bruce Springsteen song, instead of a 1970s concert recorded with a landline telephone.

I called Roy back and confirmed I wanted the car, provided it passed a mechanical inspection. He said he would get one as soon as he returned from Hawaii – an agonizing two weeks later. I agreed, and we said goodbye. I didn't expect to hear from Roy until he returned from vacation, but he called that night.

"I just landed in Hawaii," he said, "and I had eight voicemails about the car. So I want to make sure you really want it."

The Mercedes forum people found it!!!

"Yes, I definitely want it," I replied, having lost all bargaining leverage but silently celebrating that I had beaten the Mercedes forum eggheads. Thinking quickly, I replied: "If the car passes the inspection, I'll pay your full asking price."

Of course, he took me up on this offer and probably cursed himself for not listing a higher price, which I decided was penance for the poorly timed listing and his lie about the color. The good news was that, even at $41,950, there was clearly demand for the car – so I was buying smart. And so I waited.

Part 2: Buying It

As expected, I received a call from Roy after his two-week vacation. And as expected, he provided yet another warning sign that should've sent me back to AutoTrader's ultimateness.

Roy said his garage refused to do an inspection for "liability reasons," but he had them perform a "full service" so the car was "ready to go." I later found out the full service consisted primarily of replacing burnt-out turn bulbs, though it may have also included a visual inspection by Roy himself.

I was annoyed, but I decided to go through with the deal anyway. After all: *I had to have this car.* Plus, Roy uses it as his daily driver – so how bad could it be? I booked my trip for the following Saturday morning with a plan to drive back to Atlanta that day. I e-mailed Roy with my flight information and patiently waited.

On the Wednesday before the trip, Roy called again. At this point, any time I received a phone call from him I expected yet another issue that would derail the purchase for a sane car buyer. That's exactly what this was.

This time, Roy informed me that he just realized he was still one month away from paying off the car. As such, *he didn't have the title,* even though I was planning to fly to Indiana just two days later and give him a check for more than forty thousand dollars. He claimed he hadn't looked into this until now and had no idea.

I was frustrated. I reminded myself of the horsepower, the Ferraris in the rear view mirror. As I was about to get off the phone, Roy asked: "Hey, man, one more thing. Can you send me your flight info?"

And so, for the second time – now through gritted teeth – I sent Roy my flight information.

Even as I write this, I'm stunned I let this deal go through. But with some perspective, I've decided maybe this was all in Roy's plan: little problem after little problem, all perfectly arranged weeks apart so I would get over the last one before he announced the next one. Maybe he was a research psychologist doing an experiment on how much you can annoy a person before he snaps. After all: a silver car with a pre-purchase inspection and a clean title had suddenly become a pewter car with no mechanical scrutiny and *no title* – and yet I was still paying full price. I cursed Roy and wished not to hear from him again until we were making the transaction.

I had no idea how true my wish would become.

After sending my flight information to Roy for the second time, I received no reply, nor a confirmation that he would pick me up at the airport. In fact, I heard nothing from him all day Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. This worried me because it was contrary to Roy's typical procedure of "Call every other day to announce a new problem."

On Friday evening, just hours before I was to fly across four states and hand him the largest check I had ever seen, I texted him. No reply. So I called. No answer. I would be landing in Indianapolis in twelve hours with no car, no way to get home, and *no confirmation that Roy even existed.*

This time, I cursed myself. *What was this, the sixth sign of trouble in two weeks? How could I let this happen?* Roy clearly possessed the intelligence level of a grade-schooler and probably worse communication skills.

At dinner Friday night with my girlfriend, I couldn't think about anything else. It started out as anger at Roy ("What the hell is wrong with this guy?") and grew more general ("Indiana is such a shithole!") before I committed the ultimate car guy sin: announcing that I now understand why people buy from CarMax.

I didn't sleep at all that night. I strongly considered cancelling the trip and searching for another car, which I probably should've done the moment Roy's four blurry pictures revealed the trashy Euro-style front

license plate he put on the front bumper. And every moment I didn't sleep upset me even more, since I had a nine-hour drive scheduled for the next day.

Finally, at 6:07 a.m. – after hours of worry and several calls – I got a text message from Roy. It said:

Sorry I was playing golf then got over served

That was the entire text message. In other words: Roy took the day off to golf and got so plastered that he passed out for eleven hours.

Although I was happy to hear that he was alive and the transaction would go through, I was even happier when I realized that in a mere 12 hours, I would never have to speak to him again. Until I remembered that he was still waiting on the title. Crap!

Two minutes later, another text message: *What time do u land and what airline*

And so, for the third time in a week, I sent Roy my flight information. And for the third time in a week, no reply.

Begrudgingly, I got on the plane and flew to Indianapolis International Airport, presumably named because a rogue pilot once stole an airplane there and fled to Mexico after he went crazy trying to buy one of Roy's previous cars.

Surprisingly, Roy was waiting for me when I arrived in Indianapolis. He drove us to his house in an upscale suburb and he went inside to get the wagon's spare key. But there was a problem: *he had locked himself out of his own house*. Roy treated this like a daily occurrence, which it almost certainly was. I left to go test-drive the car. *Alone.*

I returned to Roy's house after about 20 minutes. By this time, his dad arrived to open the door.

I mentioned to Roy that I should get the registration so I wouldn't be hassled by the police on the way home. He agreed, and began looking through a mess of papers on his kitchen counter. He couldn't find it. Warning sign number eighty million.

We walked back out to the car, and I noticed the plates expired in January. It was April. Eighty million and one. Since I knew Roy

wouldn't be able to rectify this – and since I worried he might point out *another* issue, like the fact that the plate was stolen, or that the car was actually an E320 – I let it go.

Roy and I exchanged money and signed a bill of sale, and I began the long drive home in a 507-horsepower station wagon … with expired plates, no proof of registration, and no title.

My first stop was a gas station – because, naturally, Roy left me with a virtually empty tank. As I pumped gas, I felt my phone buzz: it was an e-mail from AutoTrader's wild ultimate yonder. A gorgeous black 2007 E63 AMG wagon had been listed by the Mercedes dealer in Atlanta. It had the same mileage as mine. No Roy, no title issue, no expired registration, a full certified pre-owned warranty. *It was sitting just 20 minutes from my house.*

They wanted $55,000.

I smiled and settled in for a long drive home. I had to have this car – and I got it.

8. Searching for the Automotive Holy Land

Our topic today is holy lands. I know what you're thinking: *He's going to offend someone!* But that's not my plan. (Now you're thinking: *Then why am I reading this?*) Instead, I'm simply going to discuss the automotive holy land. We need one, you see – an automotive sacred place, like how the Muslims have Mecca, and the mountain climbers have Everest, and the American Indoor Tanning Association has suburban New Jersey.

So where, exactly, is the automotive holy land? An easy answer is Indianapolis. That's where they hold the Indy 500, which is undoubtedly the world's most famous car race, based on the number of questions I get about it from people who otherwise couldn't tell the difference between a Nissan Altima and a rural post office. (*"Yo man, you like cars… what's up with that chick who's racing at the Indy 500?"*)

But aside from the race, Indianapolis doesn't really have a car culture. I know this because I went there to pick up my E63 wagon, and I distinctly remember what every single local was driving: a Chevy Malibu whose list of features consisted entirely of federally mandated safety equipment.

There is, of course, Detroit, which is America's motor city. Or maybe Stuttgart, which is Germany's. But these aren't holy places, unless "holy" translates to: "underpaid auto workers driving whichever one of their employer's products isn't selling." Also, the weather isn't good enough. In an automotive holy land, we should be able to drive hairy-chested sports cars year round, completely free from a) prosecution and b) Chevrolet's lineup from approximately 1971 until about two years ago.

Which brings us to Dubai. (Official motto: "You build the cars, we finish them in chrome.") But Dubai isn't about cars: it's all million-dollar license plates and bored sheiks driving G-wagens over sand dunes. Plus: any place caught hosting the *Sex and the City* movie is officially out as a potential automotive holy land.

So now we have a problem: I've pissed off everyone from Indianapolis, Detroit, Stuttgart, and Dubai. And yet *we still don't have a holy land*. That's why, after considerable thought (read: browsing Facebook), I've decided on Monaco.

I've been to Monaco five times. This, by the way, is among the single most pretentious things a human being can say out loud, rivaled only by the question *"So, where do you summer?"* But it's precisely because I've been five times that I'm certain Monaco is the automotive holy land.

A little background. Located on the Mediterranean coast, Monaco is the richest country in the world and also the best educated, though these feats are easy to achieve considering it's roughly the size of a Days Inn. Wealthy European elites have visited it for decades to partake in a highly relaxing activity known in wealthy European elite circles as: Sitting On A Large Yacht Near The Harbor.

But there's also an entirely different reason to visit Monaco: the cars. And I'm not talking about the Formula 1 race, which is reason enough to consider Monaco the automotive holy land. The Grand Prix involves glamorous celebrities, enormous boats, and 78 laps of racing where two to four vehicles actually pass one another.

But Monaco is a haven for car enthusiasts even when Formula 1 isn't in town. Allow me to walk you through a typical day.

8 a.m.: Wake up. By this point, your hotel room has already cost around €100 and you haven't even gotten out of bed. Fortunately, they have monogrammed towels. You go to the bathroom, wash your face with one of the towels, and stuff it in your bag.

9 a.m.: Eat breakfast. If this is done outside, your food will be eaten by seagulls which understand the words "No!" and "Go away!" about as well as Italian men.

10 a.m.: Walk to the Casino Monte Carlo. Even though it's only 10 a.m., there is already a Maybach 62 with Russian plates in front. Presumably, it was left there last night after the owner drunkenly decided to sleep on the casino floor in his fur coat. While you're looking at the Maybach, an Audi R8 pulls up. The driver leaves it idling outside and walks in without even looking at the valet.

12 Noon: Walk to the harbor. Dozens of young men are meticulously washing a yacht the size of an apartment building. It's owned by an 80-year-old Swiss billionaire who hasn't actually seen the boat in nine weeks. The men are wearing matching polos. You're about to remark on how stupid this looks when a Porsche Cayenne drives by towing a Ferrari on an open trailer.

1 p.m.: If you haven't had lunch, now's the time. Go to the casino and eat at one of its restaurants overlooking the Mediterranean. Prepare to pay €11 for water, €50 for a sandwich, and €24 for a napkin. Also prepare for dirty looks from restaurant staff even if you are, in fact, the Prince of Monaco.

3 p.m.: Walk to the other side of the harbor. Along the way, you see an Aston-Martin DB AR1 and a Mercedes SLS cross paths. In the US, this would only happen at Cars and Coffee Irvine. In Monaco, it's a daily occurrence. Neither driver acknowledges one another. No one in Monaco acknowledges anyone else, really.

5 p.m.: Walk the length of the F1 circuit. Two types of vehicles pass you: rented Peugeots and Porsche 911 GT3s. Occasionally, a Range Rover goes by, presumably because Hermes bags don't fit in a Ferrari 458 Spider.

6 p.m.: Walk to old town Monaco. Though there aren't any cars here, but every single business sells Ferrari memorabilia, including dental offices.

7 p.m.: Walk back to Monte Carlo, where the casino is located. By now, your legs hurt. But not as much as the legs of the guy who's been driving around all day in his Testarossa, pumping his clutch and craning his neck to see who's watching. No one is: they're all focused on the Bugattis.

8 p.m.: Dinnertime. During dinner, a Ferrari F40 goes by. You chase after it to snap a picture, and the driver parks at the casino. He's bald, short, fat, and in his mid-70s. His passenger is a tall blonde woman in her 20s. The valet doesn't even park the car up front. Those spots are reserved for a Phantom Drophead and a Koenigsegg.

11 p.m.: Time for bed. You leave the window open in your hotel room to catch some of the Mediterranean breeze. As you lay in bed, you hear the noises of downshifting Ferraris and Lamborghinis echoing between the tall buildings on Monaco's narrow streets. These sounds go on all night. This, you think, is much better for falling asleep than those "whale sounds" CDs.

Admittedly, Monaco may have a few issues preventing it from being the automotive holy land. For example: you can't drive more than 40 miles per hour in the entire country. And it's so jaded by exotic cars that the only way something with wheels could possibly turn heads there is if it was a Boeing 747 landing on Avenue Princess Grace.

But Monaco is the greatest place on earth if you want to see – and hear – all those cars you only read about in magazines. I should know. I've been there five times.

9. The Worst Drivers Are in ZipCars

I recently yelled at another driver. I know, I know: this is bad behavior. It's even worse because I have a Range Rover, which makes me look like a total prick when I'm yelling at someone else on the road. Or, you could remove "when I'm yelling at someone else on the road" and that sentence would still be true.

The good news is that it's exceptionally rare that I verbally assault someone else. The only other time I've done it was in Miami, where I was immediately pulled over by a police officer and cited for driving in a bike lane. I'm not sure how road rage turned into driving in a bike lane, but the officer didn't seem keen to stand around discussing it. He did, however, rhetorically ask: "Is there an *emergency*, sir?" which is code for: "Are you a complete *jackass*, sir?"

The answer to only one of those questions is yes.

The worst part is both other drivers were in a Chevy Uplander, which means I didn't *need* to yell at them to make them feel bad. In fact, it probably only compounded the depression they were already experiencing by simply being behind the wheel.

In the most recent situation, however, I feel my anger was slightly justified. The Uplander that caught my scorn was a taxi that cut from the right turn lane to the left turn lane, stopping at an angle that blocked the through lane. Which leads me to my point: taxi drivers are absolutely awful.

Of course, the poor quality of taxi drivers is already one of life's certainties. It's right up there with the Westboro Baptist Church protesting things like the arrival of summer, and scientific studies that discover virtually every food item either causes or prevents cancer, and sometimes both. But just to be sure we're all on the same page about taxi drivers, these are some of my recent observations.

One: taxi drivers can, and do, stop wherever they wish. This includes two-lane roads, driveways, and interstate highways, unless they're being hailed by a racial minority.

Two: taxis don't have to be up to the same standards as the vehicles driven by the rest of us. This means that loose-fitting Wal-Mart hubcaps are far more common than working turn signals. Or seat

belts.

Three: even though every single taxi driver has an ear-mounted Bluetooth device, they drive as if they're composing haikus using a Palm Pilot with a stylus.

So we all agree that taxi drivers are awful. But I've recently identified one group that's even worse: car sharers.

ZipCar is the largest car sharing company in the US. It's located in all major US cities, and also Pittsburgh. And not one person who uses it can drive.

Basically, ZipCar works like this: you don't own a car because you're either a broke college student or one of the few Americans who actually uses public transit. (In other words: a liberal. Or someone who lives in the Northeast. In other words: a liberal.) But you recognize that you *occasionally* need a car to do things, such as visit a friend's house to watch Jon Stewart. So you pay a monthly fee for ZipCar, which gives you on-demand access to a fleet of cars parked all around your city. That way, you can "check out" a car much like you'd "check out" a DVD from Netflix. (You return it with just as many scratches.)

The primary reason ZipCar's drivers are the worst is obvious: they don't drive very often. Since they're not behind the wheel more than once every few days, or every few weeks, they fall out of practice with things like checking blind spots, or stopping at stop signs, or stopping at all. Fortunately, ZipCar doesn't have any Chevy Uplanders, so I probably won't be provoked into any fits of rage.

But there are two more reasons ZipCar drivers are the worst. One is that ZipCar covers fuel. That's right: this is a rental car company that *pays for the gas*. If you're like me, you're probably thinking "drag strip," or maybe even "track day." But the coolest thing ZipCar has is an automatic BMW 328i, presumably with damaged suspension and gouged tires. Still, even if you don't go a track day, free gas means there's absolutely no benefit to driving in any manner besides foot to the floor.

The craziest part, however, is that ZipCar also pays for insurance. There's a small deductible, but ZipCar carries the policy. In other words, ZipCar provides free insurance to occasional drivers in unfamiliar vehicles who are going as fast as possible because they get

free gas.

This, ladies and gentlemen, makes them worse than taxi drivers. Even taxi drivers in Chevy Uplanders.

10. 2012 Volkswagen Jetta – Review

It's time to review the 2012 Volkswagen Jetta. I know what you're thinking: *Why are you going to do that? I didn't buy this book for reviews of crappy economy cars! In fact, I didn't buy this book at all, because I would never spend my money on it!*

And to that I say: Mom, please calm down.

I am reviewing the Jetta because, at one point in my life, I actually had one. This makes me highly knowledgeable about everything they're capable of, which is very little. Let's get started.

Why? Just Why?

I know, I know: I'm a car guy. I had an E63 AMG wagon, for God's sake. *So why the hell did I buy a Volkswagen Jetta?*

The important thing to understand here is that I did not buy it. No one really *buys* the Volkswagen Jetta. It's more that they're forced to own it because Volkswagen offers such massive incentives that they'd be crazy not to. In fact, this is a typical pre-Jetta purchase conversation:

Husband: Honey, I'm going to the VW dealer to buy a Jetta.
Wife: But we already *have* a Jetta, and we just got the brake lights working for the first time!
Husband: I know! But if we buy another, Volkswagen will pay off our mortgage!

Of course, this is a slight exaggeration. An actual Volkswagen offer is typically more along the lines of: *Buy a Jetta, receive as many Routans as you can drive home in one afternoon!*

I fell victim to one of these special offers. In my case, it was a lease deal through my employer that included free maintenance, free insurance, free registration, and no down payment. It was really the "free insurance" bit that got me, though, as you'll probably understand if you've read the other stories in this book.

The Jetta I chose was the "S" model, which is code for: "So bad we can't even pawn it off on the rental fleets." It didn't have floormats or visor mirrors. It *did* have 15-inch hubcaps. Stunningly, this wasn't

the bottom of the range. There's an even worse version, called simply the Jetta, no trim level, which is code for: "If we decontented this car any further, we'd be in violation of federal law." The promotion to sell those is *Buy a Jetta and we'll send your kids to college.*

Anyway: on to the review.

Exterior

Before we cover the exterior, I'm going to start with a little history. When I was younger, Jettas were really cool. Well, no, come to think of it, they were mostly Brazillian-built crap. But that changed with the fourth-generation Jetta, which came out in 1999. That one was the "it" car for girls in their teens, girls in their 20s, and men who were confused. The same was true of the next model, which came out in 2005 and inexplicably used a five-cylinder engine.

But the latest Jetta is no longer cool. From every angle, it looks like a nondescript blob styled by people who were apparently tasked with averaging out the lines on every other sedan sold in the last decade. Normally, this is where I'd provide some platitude about one single aspect that looks nice, but there are none – a fact I'm sure of after visiting my local Hertz, where the Jetta has been the featured car of the week for the last sixteen months.

Worse, the latest Jetta has lost its appeal to young, attractive women who seem to always be in workout clothes. Last week, for example, I saw a man driving one, and he didn't even look confused.

Interior

Because I had the Jetta S, my interior was slightly below par in the world of midsize sedans, or compact sedans, or 1:18 scale models built in underdeveloped Asian countries. This stemmed from the fact that every single interior material was created from the cheapest stuff Volkswagen could find. They probably sent teams scouring the earth looking for incredibly cheap plastic, and when they got back, Ferdinand Piech looked at it and said: *"Vut? You vant me to spend one euro per square hectare?"* And of course those people were killed.

The interior's biggest problem was actually its Bluetooth system, which connected with my phone on precisely one glorious occasion when I was able to stream music and, at the same time, think to myself: *Oh God, now I can never turn off the car again*. The auxiliary music connection also didn't work. That meant I had to listen to CDs

whenever I drove my Jetta, which was appropriate, really, since the interior reminded me of 2001.

Driving Experience

For as many problems as I had with the interior, and the exterior, and the general idea of driving a Jetta, by far the car's biggest flaw was its driving experience.

If you've rented a Jetta recently, you probably don't think it's so bad. That's because most rental Jettas use the 2.5-liter five-cylinder engine that makes a reasonable 150 horsepower. My engine was actually *below* rental grade, and you know you have a problem when Hertz says: *"No, this is too shitty to give to people paying nineteen bucks a day."*

The engine in my Jetta was a 115-horsepower 2.0-liter that was carried over, completely unchanged, from the 1994 model. Really: it made the exact same horsepower, and, under acceleration, the exact same noise. (Which can be defined technically as "a lot.") But since my Jetta was twice the weight of a 1994 Jetta, you had to be near redline whenever you wanted to do anything, such as back out of your driveway.

Handling was also "subpar," which is a nice way of saying "a refrigerated box truck would corner better than this piece of crap." But I really didn't focus much on handling, mainly because, every time I turned a corner, I was instead thinking: *Is this steering wheel made out of … cardboard?*

Conclusion

I've said a lot of harsh things about the Jetta, and I stand by each of them. But I strongly recommend it anyway. That's because Volkswagen is constantly setting new volume targets, which primarily come from adding zeroes to old ones. As a result, the Jetta will only become an even better deal in the future. Eventually, they'll resort to an offer like "Buy a Jetta, get a Volkswagen dealership," and that is a deal you should take, because then you can upgrade to a Passat.

11. Elise Across America

Part 1: The Beginning

All great journeys have an inspiration. The Lewis and Clark Expedition, for instance, never would've happened if not for Thomas Jefferson, who summoned the two men to the Oval Office, sat them down in large presidential chairs, and said: *"What are you, chicken?"* This led Lewis and Clark to set out, explore the west, and bring it smallpox. All of this is documented in detail on the web's most accurate historical resource, at least until the Wikipedia editors change it.

Like Lewis and Clark, I once took an epic journey. But mine had a different inspiration: I hit a tree with my Porsche.

Some background. The epic journey I'm referring to is the time I bought a Lotus Elise in San Francisco and drove it home to Atlanta, which is a distance of around 3,000 miles or roughly 11 million uncomfortable highway expansion joints, all of which I crossed thinking: *Those tractor-trailers are really big.* (Actually, that isn't entirely true. Sometimes I was thinking: *My back really hurts.*)

The Porsche I crashed was my company car: a brand-new, bright red 911 Cabriolet with a $110,000 sticker price and just 79 miles on the odometer. It belonged to my employer, Porsche Cars North America, who hired me using the same logic that probably led to the 924: *they can't all be great*.

Finally, the tree in question had fallen in the road. This is an important distinction. I did *not*, as you might suspect, drunkenly take my Porsche off-roading under the good ol' boy philosophy of: "*Betcha I kin nock down dat tree!"* Instead, I came around a blind corner on a rainy night, and BOOM! Tree in the road. It could happen to anyone, including you, which is why I suggest you consider mounting a chainsaw on the front of your vehicle. Lewis and Clark also would've done this, except the chainsaw was not yet invented, and if it was, they probably would've used it to trim their enormous beards.

Unfortunately, the tree's presence in the road didn't carry much weight with Porsche's chief operating officer, who angrily admonished me for reckless driving as if I was a three-year-old who drew on the walls with a crayon. As I recall, our argument went like this:

Him: Why the hell did you hit the tree?!
Me: Well, it was in the *road*…
Him: So what? You hit *everything* in the road? What if I was in the road? Would you hit me?!
Me: Maybe if I had a chainsaw mounted on the front of my car…

This finer point was also lost on my colleagues, who embellished the story from hitting a downed tree to running over a group of disabled orphans on a field trip to the factory of snuggles and rainbows. Which, I swear, never happened in my company car.

All of this presented a problem. My reputation in the company car program depended on my driving skills, even though my actual job mainly involved staring at Microsoft Excel and thinking: *I wonder if anyone would notice if I took a two-hour lunch today*. And now, my reputation was at risk. To solve this problem, I decided give up my perk and instead participate in an endeavor completely unknown to nearly all automaker employees: buying a vehicle.

But first I had to decide exactly what to buy. That part was easy, since I, as a 23-year-old male, was well versed in precisely what makes a car great, namely that it must: a) impress women, and b) drive.

As a result, the car would be a Lotus Elise. That's because it looks like a Lamborghini but costs like a two-bedroom condo in post-crash Phoenix (in other words: thirty grand, no money down, and if you buy today, we'll throw in the roof), which makes it perfect for anyone who's on a budget, but still wants to impress women.

There was another important reason I chose the Elise: while Lotus is British, Toyota builds the Elise's engine and transmission. That's a big deal. It means the major parts weren't created by the Brits, whose engineering strategy seems to be: *"Let's sort it out at the pub!"* Instead, they were done by the Japanese, who are highly skilled at making everything from small toys your children might accidentally ingest to tentacle porn. Admittedly, Lotus was responsible for all of the other stuff, which meant the window switches could, at any time, begin controlling the windshield wipers.

The Elise was also a good pick because it drives like a go-kart due to a curb weight that measurably increases when you attach a license plate. But that posed another problem: the Elise is tiny. It isn't the

Elise's size that's the problem, but rather mine. It's small and I'm big. Not big like a *Family Feud* host, but big like Atlanta Hawks star center Al Horford, who, coincidentally, lives in my neighborhood and would never be caught dead in a Lotus, though he may be able to palm one and dribble it a couple times.

So I visited the Lotus dealer to decide whether I could fit. This wasn't my best idea, as they were so excited to see a wide-eyed 23-year-old that they *almost* let me touch a Lotus before informing me I wasn't a serious buyer and directing me towards the area where they sell t-shirts. This annoyed me, but not as much as the t-shirts themselves, which looked sort of like $50 wash rags with the Aston Martin logo. If I couldn't afford a Lotus, I sure as hell couldn't afford a t-shirt.

But I *could* afford a Lotus, so I set out in search of the right one. As a 23-year-old, my strategy was: *the longer I spend looking, the less time I spend driving.* So I called on the very first Lotus that met my strict parameters, which mainly consisted of: a) must be orange, and b) must be available. After a five-minute phone call and some light negotiating, the car was mine. Yes, I was actually this impulsive. Did I mention I was 23?

Now that I located the right car with all the diligence of buying a computer mouse, I had another issue: the car's in San Francisco. I'm in Atlanta. You can probably see where I'm going with this.

It was July 22, 2011, when I touched down at San Francisco International Airport. The next day, I planned to begin a cross-country drive in a tiny British sports car that *I had no idea if I could even fit inside.*

The seller picked me up at the airport in a battered Honda Civic with his brother in tow, likely in case I turned out to be a knife-wielding psychopath. Considering the ample care I took before the purchase, I have no idea why they would've suspected this.

After a 40-minute ride with my bag in my lap ("Sorry man, the trunk's busted"), we arrived at the seller's house, where he lived with his parents. The dad spoke with an Indian accent so thick I needed the son to translate, while the mom was partaking in an age-old Indian tradition: cooking an elaborate meal comprised of food that no American could possibly identify.

It was late, I was tired, and I had hotel reservations an hour away in

Santa Cruz. I told this to the seller, who assured me I'd be on the road soon.

Not so.

I was still there an hour later, trying to make one-syllable small talk with the dad as the seller located the car's documents at roughly the same speed as tree growth. The title was in one room. The service records were in another. The DMV title transfer form was buried under something. We had been planning this for a week, but his preparation made it seem like I had showed up that night, held a gun to his head, and announced: *"Gimme all the paperwork for your Lotus!"* Worst of all, he couldn't find the owner's manual. That was possibly the most important part, since running across a Lotus dealer on my trip was about as likely as it had been for Lewis and Clark.

As the seller searched for documents, I was simultaneously fending off the mom's food offers, which came at about the same rate as her son's paperwork discoveries. The night went like this:

Seller: Found the registration.
Mom: Do you want curry?!
Seller: The radio manual is around here somewhere…
Mom: How about palak paneer?
Seller: Do you want this keychain?
Mom: I have vindaloo!
Me: So, where are you from?
Dad: India.

Finally, after the seller located every single item he could find, stopping just short of the "L" volume of Encyclopedia Britannica, he insisted on typing a bill of sale. In most used car transactions this takes approximately nine seconds and is written on a napkin. But the seller insisted on making *his* bill of sale as lengthy and complex as possible, using language skills he had clearly not gotten from his dad, but repetitiveness that may have come from his mother.

Thankfully, my phone rang, and I walked outside to answer. It was the night manager at the hotel in Santa Cruz calling to make sure I was still coming. *Even a perfect stranger thought this was taking too long.* I went inside to stop everything and leave right away. But my getaway was foiled: the seller remembered, only after finishing his masterpiece bill of sale, that his printer didn't work. And a plate of newly prepared, totally unidentifiable food was waiting for me on the dining

room table.

Part 2: California

I woke up the next morning in Santa Cruz and walked outside to examine what the hell I had just bought. My new Lotus was, indeed, orange. But it was also dirty. I solved this problem with a gas station squeegee and three paper towels, cleaning the car's entire exterior in about eleven minutes.

There were also a few other issues. For example: the headlights didn't work. Actually, that isn't strictly true: *one* of the headlights didn't work. The other occasionally flickered. This was almost certainly because the seller installed them himself after becoming frustrated with the original headlights, which are notorious for offering the same brightness – and lifespan – as a scented candle.

The replacements he chose were Xenon lights, which gave off an annoying blue glow that he probably considered "mad tyte, yo." The only problem was that the seller is the kind of person who actually *says* "mad tyte, yo," which meant that he botched the installation. Also: the stereo was stuck on display mode. The seller probably installed that, too, presumably after robbing a car audio store and driving away under cover of headlight darkness.

The good news was that I fit inside. Sort of. You see, the Elise comes with a removable cloth top, which I am convinced is a direct result of Lotus not having the engineering resources to create an actual roof. But *my* Lotus had the optional "Touring Package" that featured high-end luxuries such as cabin insulation and padded seats. The Touring Package also included a removable hardtop. But it couldn't really be removed, since there was nowhere in the car to stow it. In other words: the roof was on until I got home, unless I got fed up and left it by the side of the road.

That was a very real possibility. With the top in place, getting in the car involved the following steps:

1. Open the door, revealing a gap approximately the size of a toilet bowl.
2. Assume the fetal position on the ground outside the car.
3. Ask passersby to pick me up and place me in the driver's seat.

So getting in was a challenge. But getting out was harder. It was also

more embarrassing, since the car drew a crowd anywhere I went. That meant any time I pulled up to a gas pump, there were at least three middle-schoolers filming with their cell phone cameras, ready for me to swing open the door and twist my way out like a contortionist mime on the Santa Monica Pier. In fact, here are probably several videos of this on YouTube that end with me saying "Son of a bitch!" as I hit my head on the roof.

Ground clearance was also a problem. If I had hit the fallen tree in the Lotus, I probably would've lost my legs. But at least that would've made it easier to get inside.

The good news was the Elise was obviously a fabulous car to drive. Acceleration was intense, and the unassisted steering made for great handling. If you've never driven a car with unassisted steering before, allow me to explain: when you're moving, a simple turn of the wheel sends the car in *precisely* the direction you wish to go. But when you're stopped, turning the wheel is roughly as effective as a locomotive engineer saying: *"Forget the tracks! Let's take the train across this field!"* It's so difficult that you'd be better off walking to the front of the car and manually adjusting the front wheels individually, except that would require getting out, and you'd hit your head.

I was excited to enjoy the Elise on the Pacific Coast Highway, which was the first day of my trip. I was spending the first night with my friend Dan, who lived five hours south in Santa Barbara. A Lotus on the Pacific Coast Highway: it was the ultimate dream for someone who plays with cars. Except…

I quickly discovered the Pacific Coast Highway isn't all it's cracked up to be. It's not the highway's fault. The highway's great. It's one of those highways with so many curves and drops and twists that a wrong move sends you over a cliff and into the ocean, where recovering your body would be so difficult that the county might bill your family for it. Could there be anything more exciting?

It turns out, the answer is yes. For instance: standing in front of my camera's battery charger and trying to guess when the light will turn green. That's because summer on the PCH involves driving about 23 miles per hour behind what I can only assume is every rented RV in existence. For people who get irritated by big SUVs, imagine spending eight hours behind a dozen of vehicles the size of a school bus being piloted by people whose primary car is a midsize Acura.

Eventually – following hours of thinking *"I wonder what engine is in that RV?"* – I arrived in Santa Barbara and got out of the Lotus, which involved honking the horn until Dan came to pull me out. I grabbed my stuff and walked into Dan's small apartment, which overlooks the ocean, provided you stand on a chair on his balcony. (This kind of luxury can be yours for just two grand a month.)

We went to the center of town for dinner. Santa Barbara contains the kind of main street that, in the south, would be a prime location for frat guys to cruise back and forth in a pickup truck while waving the rebel flag and screaming the only word in the southern frat guy vocabulary: *Wooooo!*

In Santa Barbara, however, it includes a very diverse array of couples, from lesbians to gays, each of whom have a very diverse array of adopted children. They all showered the Lotus with attention by yelling a wide variety of things like: *"You're killing the environment!"* and my personal favorite: *"Your headlight is out!"* Flattering, really.

The next morning, we headed to Willow Springs Raceway. Willow Springs is a huge complex of several racetracks that was built in the middle of the desert, presumably to hide it from California politicians who would otherwise attempt to install a carpool lane in the turns.

I slept in while Dan drove out early for a driver's meeting. Dan would be driving his MazdaSpeed6 on the track, while I – a novice without a helmet – would stand by and get sunburned. This sounds bad, but was actually very enticing since it meant I wouldn't have to spend the day in the Lotus.

I arrived for the tail end of the driver's meeting. Like all driver meetings at amateur events, it was led by a beer-bellied 60-year-old who probably raced at the same circuit as Colin Chapman, just on different days, a fact which he undoubtedly still brags about to people he meets at gas stations. He had all the drivers gathered around and was screaming things like:

Man: WHICH ONE OF YOU THINKS HE KNOWS WHEN IT'S APPROPRIATE TO PASS?
Drivers [Collectively]: Uh…
Man: I THINK COLIN CHAPMAN PUT IT BEST IN 1969…

This lasted roughly 40 minutes. Not the driver's meeting, I mean this one particular anecdote about Colin Chapman.

That gave me ample time to take the Lotus on a parade lap, which involved keeping to a restricted speed limit until I was over a hill and away from the rotund 60-year-old. Then I could open the car up as if I were racing. I'm glad I did this, because it taught me the Lotus actually *was* a fun car, and not just a tremendously uncomfortable highway cruiser. I couldn't wait to get home to Atlanta, where I would enjoy it all the time, except at night.

After the parade lap, I left Dan and began the journey towards Las Vegas, where I would meet my mom. Mom had agreed to accompany me from Vegas to Denver, my birthplace, where she and Dad enjoy a life that's totally free of thoughts like: *No, I can't take that route home. There's a dip in the road.* Needless to say, Mom would be in for a wake-up call.

I got my own wake-up call when I left Willow Springs and quickly discovered that driving through the Mojave Desert in July is slightly less comfortable than trying to change a light bulb when it's on. Fortunately, the Touring Package that gifted me the annoying roof also included air-conditioning.

But there was a problem: no matter what setting I pushed, nothing came out of the vents. And I don't mean nothing like: "You're in a Lotus so it probably just sucks." I mean nothing as in it was similar to walking up to a possum and saying: "Please, breathe on me." Except, of course, I wasn't going to get bit and infected with some sort of incurable possum virus that would render me incapable of leading a normal life, but highly skilled at partaking in favorite possum activities, such as darting into the road right before a car drives by.

Panicked, I Googled the problem on my phone. Nothing relevant came up. I soon realized it didn't matter *why* the air wasn't working. It just wasn't. That meant, like thousands of settlers in Conestoga wagons over a century before me, I would soon cross the entire Mojave Desert without climate control. And despite the lingering promise of gold and silver in the west, even they wouldn't have attempted the trip in the middle of July.

Near Barstow, I pulled over at a gas station and flopped out of the Lotus like a seal climbing onto the shore. I use this comparison, by the way, because the amount of sweat that accompanied me out of the Lotus was similar to water on a harbor seal emerging from San Francisco Bay. Also, because I could no longer feel my legs.

With Vegas still two hours away, I prepared for the rest of my drive with more gas and a climate control system that would make Lewis and Clark proud: one bottle of water to drink, and two to pour on myself. Mom was *really* in for a wake-up call.

Part 3: To Denver

For anyone who may be considering driving from Las Vegas to Denver in an un-air-conditioned Lotus with your mom, I have some advice: *for God's sake, don't do it.* Some of you are thinking "that sounds like common sense," but remember: you're dealing with a person who flew across the country to buy a Lotus based solely on the word of a seller who thinks the exclamation point is an effective marketing tool.

I think Mom first realized she wasn't in for a typical roadtrip when we opened the trunk. I should explain: the trunk in an Elise rests under the same cover as the engine. When opened, the hole created is roughly the same size as a pumpkin. This makes it slightly easier to climb inside than the interior.

Since the trunk already contained my suitcase, which consisted of a change of underwear and a toothbrush, it was completely full. This meant we had to *throw away* various objects to fit mom's luggage. I felt like a bush pilot trying to take off an overweight plane in the Andes, though I bet none of them ever jettisoned a can of fix-a-flat.

Mom's *second* indication the trip would be unusual came just outside Las Vegas, when she asked: *"Why's it so hot in here?"*

The drive out of Vegas and through Utah is a tremendously uneventful one. Ours was marked by just two interesting occurrences. One: at some point, the speed limit goes up to 80 mph, and then promptly back down to 75. They're calling this a "test zone" to see if an 80 mph speed limit is really possible in Utah, what with all the Mormonism. If I were asked to provide guidance, my suggestion would be: you could make the speed limit 200 because *no one drives out here*.

That became clear after we passed the town of Salina, Utah, which started the second interesting occurrence: no highway services for 110 miles. I later found out this is the longest distance in the entire interstate highway system without a gas station, a rest stop, a mechanic, or a middle-schooler who could film me hitting my head on the Lotus's roof. Of course, it's also where the Elise threw a check engine light.

The light went on about halfway through the 110-mile stretch of no highway services, which meant we were the single furthest we could be from help *in the entire interstate highway system.* I said nothing to Mom. This was intentional. She, like all mothers, is the kind of person who insists on leaving for the airport at 10 a.m. on Thursday even though your flight isn't until sometime next month. She would worry. She would also insist that we call a mechanic, who would arrive hours later and announce that he only works on pickup trucks.

So we continued along through something called the San Rafael Swell, which apparently used to be a great ocean but is now a vast collection of steep red cliffs and sharp rocks that looks a lot like Mars. That's an

interesting coincidence, since residents of Utah are apparently consumed by thoughts of aliens. They proved this on at least two occasions, when I was asked by Utahns (Utahers? Utes? Mormons.) while filling up: *"Izzat thing an alien spaceship?"* There is no possible way to answer this question, so I simply replied with: *"If I curl up in the fetal position, can you put me inside?"*

We eventually arrived at our overnight stop, which was a town in Western Colorado called Glenwood Springs. (Motto: *The last reasonably priced fuel before Aspen!*) It was here, as we sat alone in a Denny's around 8 p.m., that I announced the presence of the check engine light. After sitting quietly for a few seconds, Mom replied: "We can book a flight home for tomorrow, but we'll have to leave for the airport right now."

Just kidding. Showing remarkable poise, Mom merely insisted that I get the light checked out. So the following morning I visited a local Toyota dealership in Glenwood Springs. (Motto: *The last reasonably priced cars before Aspen!*) Since the Lotus had a Toyota engine and a Toyota transmission, I assumed this would be no problem. But I had assumed wrong, as I quickly realized when the conversation started like this:

Me: *My check engine light came on yesterday. Can you guys read it for me?*
Service advisor [Glancing at the Lotus]: *Izzat thing an alien spaceship?*

Actually, he insisted the dealership would *only* look at Toyota products, even though reading a check engine light simply involves plugging a universal code reader into a universal plug that all vehicles possess (even the Lotus). Sensing his attitude, I then offered *any possible amount of money*, which didn't change his response.

Spurned by the Toyota dealership, I drove to a nearby Jiffy Lube. There, workers fawned over the car, offered to diagnose the light for free, and didn't even ask me if the Lotus was anything besides an automobile.

After all that, it turned out to be a misfire. We cleared the light and dismissed it as a one-time occurrence, which is a common car-guy problem-solving tool when you know you can't do anything about it anyway. I was pleased I didn't force the issue with the Toyota dealer, who probably would've eventually agreed to check out the car, but

only if I purchased a Yaris.

With the issue handled, we pressed on towards Denver by way of the beautiful mountain town of Aspen. (Motto: *Nothing is reasonably priced!*) For those who aren't familiar, Aspen is a tremendously wealthy place filled with people who say things like: *"That simply isn't done."*

Here's a snapshot of a day there:

1. The Aspen Police drive Volvo XC90s and Toyota Highlander Hybrids. When you arrive, you're stopped and detained unless you can provide a detailed answer to the question: "*Which do you prefer: Martha's Vineyard or The Hamptons?"*

2. Once you're through, you're immediately cut off by a G-Wagen convertible with a bumper sticker reading: FREE KEN LAY. It may also be a Defender 90.

3. Eventually, you go to a restaurant with a sign on the door that says "No Gucci? No Rolex? No Service." (Actually, for the poor among us, there is a McDonald's in Aspen. Their door sign says: *For the love of God, we don't have caviar.*)

4. You're assigned a personal servant to follow you around all day and pick up any items you may discard, such as designer shoes that you purchase but later decide aren't the proper color.

Needless to say, the Elise didn't cause much commotion in Aspen, where residents are used to seeing the latest Ferraris, Porsches, and Gulfstream jets. But it *was* fun to drive around feeling like one of the initiated, until someone would drive by and yell: *"Nice Celica!"*

After a gondola ride to the top of Aspen Mountain (where it was snowing in the middle of July), we left town over Independence Pass, which peaks at the 12,095-foot Continental Divide. Then we started our descent into Denver. A few hours later, I arrived at my childhood home with a loud scrape on the driveway.

Part 4: Going Home

I left Denver the next morning accompanied by Joe, my high school best friend. Joe also thought the idea of driving a two-seat sports car across the country was cool, just like I had before the Mojave Desert. Speaking of the desert, I decided not to tell Joe about the air-conditioning until we were a few hours beyond Denver, mainly so he couldn't bail out and have a friend come pick him up.

You might know Colorado for the Rocky Mountains, but that's really only half the state. To get a clearer idea of the other half, allow me to paint a picture for you. Imagine, if you will, *nothing*. Now imagine that it's *endless*. Now triple that. This is a perfect description of the United States between the Denver International Airport and approximately Wrigley Field.

So I did what any sane, rational individual driving a bright orange sports car would do: I cruised along at 90 miles per hour throughout eastern Colorado and Kansas, where the speed limit probably could've been 150 without a significant increase in road deaths.

But the Kansas State Trooper who stopped me would probably

disagree with that assertion, as demonstrated by the citation he issued me for 92 in a 75 zone. I know what you're thinking: *Ninety-two in a 75?! In Virginia, that would be ten years of hard labor!* Well, in Kansas, it's eighty bucks, and it's payable online. By the way: the trooper didn't say anything about the car, though I'm sure the dashcam video was a big hit back at the station.

Continuing through Kansas meant driving with the windows down, as the temperature could only be described as "slighty cooler than rolling around naked on the surface of the sun." Eventually, the lowered windows caused a problem when a pebble no larger than a dime bounced up from the road and hit me in the face. An inch to the left, and it would've scraped my eye, ruining the entire trip. An inch to the right and it would've missed me entirely. To commemorate the fateful bounce, I saved it in the car's largest storage compartment, which was therefore full.

For those of you wondering exactly what highway cruising is like in a Lotus, here's a general overview: every second or so, there's a highway expansion joint. This wouldn't be a problem in a normal car. In a Lotus, it feels like you've just driven over a desktop fax machine.

Then you have the noise. Not road noise, but noise from the engine, which is raging behind your head so loudly that it's easier to send your passenger a text message than it is to talk to him. Of course, that isn't actually possible, since you're packed so tightly that movement is mostly out of the question.

Also, there's no cruise control. That means your foot is constantly on the gas pedal, which is no wider than a highlighter. Eventually, you get tired of pressing it and employ a new tactic: accelerate up to around 100 miles per hour, then take your foot off the gas and let the car slowly coast down to the speed limit as you attempt to stretch out. This is most of what I remember about Oklahoma.

And there's another nagging issue: reliability. Yes, the Lotus has that Toyota engine, so it should be fine. But "should be" and "is" can be two very different things. And when you're driving on the Indian Nation Turnpike in central Oklahoma – this is a real thing – there's a constant fear lingering in the back of your mind. *What if I break down? Can I tow it somewhere? Or will I just have to abandon it in Oklahoma and sign it over to the Indians?*

But of all its issues, the Lotus's very worst roadtrip flaw is the size of

its fuel tank. After much research on the topic, I've come to the scientific conclusion that it is, in precise terms, slightly smaller than a decorative pillow. As a result, we stopped for gas every few hours, which meant that wide-eyed onlookers were constantly asking questions about the Elise's engine size, price, and performance. They were always disappointed with the answers.

Our stop for the night was a Best Western in Van Buren, Arkansas, a welcome sight after 850 sweltering miles with our elbows touching. The desk clerk initially offered us two rooms, which we declined. So, summoning every strand of political correctness he had ever gleaned from living in the 22nd largest city in Arkansas, he replied: *"Oh. Do y'all want one bed?"*

We carried our suitcases to our room (two double beds, in case you're wondering), and set out in search of food. In Van Buren, this was easy because there were no more than four restaurants, and two were flying the rebel flag. But since we couldn't agree on the other two – McDonald's and Burger King – we decided to go to both. This should've been easy. It was not.

We started at McDonald's, where we ordered and waited for about 15 minutes for someone – *anyone* – to merely accept payment, let alone make our food. This wouldn't be so bad, except it was July and we were sitting in a car without air conditioning in the middle of Arkansas. We were drenched in sweat by the time we reached Burger King, where we repeated the very same process. By now, we both wished we had gone to one of the rebel flag restaurants, where we would've happily sworn lifelong allegiances to Robert E. Lee just for some cold air.

Returning to our room, we blasted the air conditioner and took off as many clothes as possible before eating. Maybe the desk clerk was on to something.

The next morning, we noticed an alien-looking Honda minivan in the parking lot. The owner walked up and told us it was a Honda StepWGN, and that it was sold only in Japan. He had imported it a few days earlier, and, like us, he was driving it home across the country. He didn't tell us how he avoided government rules that expressly prohibited cars newer than 25 years from entering the US, and we certainly didn't ask. We were sitting in a bright orange, two-seat, mid-engine British sports car at a Best Western in Van Buren, Arkansas, and we didn't even have the rarest car in the parking lot.

The trip east out of Van Buren went exactly as planned, with stops limited to a few landmarks: Memphis's Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated; Graceland; and – of course – Elvis's birthplace in Tupelo, Mississippi. It was there that we were approached by a rather large man with a southern accent who seemed eager to ogle the car. By now, this was expected, and I waited for the inevitable *"Wanna trade fer muh pickup truck? Huh huh huh."*

Instead, he began to recount a long history of the Lotus Formula 1 racing team, rattling off the names of drivers and famous races. I briefly wondered if he was the beer-bellied driving instructor from Willow Springs, but this guy didn't share any Colin Chapman anecdotes. Still, this just goes to show: don't judge a book by its cover. Even if it has a beer belly and a southern accent.

Joe drove through most of Mississippi and Alabama and I took over once again at our last gas stop just east of Birmingham. We were getting close. After spending the previous week mentally calculating how far we were from the nearest Lotus dealer, I was finally starting to lighten up. I made a confession to Joe as we entered Georgia:

"I didn't think we'd make it," I said. "But I do now."
Joe replied: "Same."

I had a divine feeling upon first seeing the Atlanta skyline, which is probably the first divine feeling anyone has ever had when seeing the Atlanta skyline, unless they're moving to Atlanta from, say, Van Buren, Arkansas.

When we crossed “The Perimeter,” the section of Interstate 285 that surrounds Atlanta, I realized we were less than 30 minutes from completing this ridiculous journey. Before long, we were driving the Lotus up the very same driveway I backed the ill-fated Porsche down just a few weeks earlier. After three thousand miles, five road days, one speeding ticket, one check engine light and considerable back pain, the trip was over. We pulled into the driveway with a loud scrape on the curb.

Once we stopped, I honked the horn and waited for annoyed neighbors to unfold us from the car. We walked inside and celebrated in the only way we could imagine: by turning up the air conditioning. Lewis and Clark would’ve been proud.

12. Wasting Time on Craigslist

I recently discovered an excellent way to waste time. This shouldn't surprise you. As an unemployed writer, I spend the bulk of my time sitting around my house while thinking: *When is the mail going to come?* (Once the mail does come, I start thinking: *How the hell am I going to pay these bills?*)

My latest time-wasting idea strays from my normal effort of drag racing those pull-back cars you buy at the drug store. (For the interested, these races always end the same way: one car veers left and falls off the coffee table.) Instead, I've discovered you can waste tons of time by simply trying to sell a car on Craigslist.

I found this out a few months ago when I attempted to use Craigslist to sell my 2001 Toyota Prius with considerable body damage. Before we get to Craigslist, a few words on how I came to own a 2001 Toyota Prius with considerable body damage.

It all started in college when my friend Simon needed a car. Simon is a liberal, which is a term they say on Fox News with the same tone you might use to describe someone who lets their six-year-old recline the airplane seat.

I mention this because it meant Simon, like all liberals, wanted a Prius. Of course, I highly discouraged a used Prius under the famous theory of: *If you buy this car, the hybrid battery will fail*. But he bought the car, and the hybrid battery failed, resulting in a repair bill roughly equal to the value of the car.

The next major event in the car's life came several years later during a snowstorm. Snow in Atlanta is different from snow anywhere else. For example: in your large, northern city, a snowstorm may cause people to drive a little slower, wear heavy coats, or possibly shovel out a street parking spot and place a floor lamp in it. In Atlanta, what happens is people go to the store and buy *every single unit of toilet paper they can find.* Hygiene, apparently, is very important to snowbound Atlantans.

Anyway: we got about four inches of snow during this particular storm, which was enough to close down the vast majority of the city, such as the airport, the schools, and apparently the place where they keep the snowplows.

The result is that, like most Atlantans, Simon crashed during this snowstorm, smashing the Prius's rear quarter panel. With his budget now vastly depleted by the battery repair, Simon took the Prius to *one of those guys*. You know who I mean: you meet them in a grocery store parking lot, they pound out the dent with a hammer, and they paint it. In this case, with a color apparently chosen entirely at random.

After graduation, Simon got a job in New York City as a consultant, though presumably not for the automotive industry. This meant he no longer needed the Prius. And so, for three grand – or around three-quarters of what its last service cost – the Prius became mine. In other words: I bought a battery with a car wrapped around it.

But I quickly grew tired of the Prius and decided to sell it, which brings us back to Craigslist.

Considering the body damage, I felt the Prius wasn't good enough for AutoTrader or cars.com. That meant turning to Craigslist. I believe most enthusiasts will agree with this decision, as Craigslist is well regarded for being a clearinghouse of a) low-end automobiles, and b) rusted out shells that were once low-end automobiles.

I received hundreds of e-mails on the Prius over the next few weeks, all of which can be easily classified into one of the following five time-wasting categories:

1. Spam. Nearly every e-mail I received during the Prius's first week on Craigslist was spam, mostly for penis enlargement pills. But I also

got “Meet Christian Singles Today,” and “Eat Yourself Skinny,” and “Discover the Secret to Boosting Testosterone,” and my personal favorite: an e-mail whose subject line said only “Spam.”

I also received many e-mails trying to get my password for Facebook, and Bank of America, and SunTrust, and virtually anything I have a password for, including my e-mail account, where the hacker would undoubtedly be overrun by spam for penis enlargement pills.

2. Questions I’ve already answered. Eventually, I started to get inquiries about the Prius. And when I say inquiries, I of course mean poorly worded e-mails that asked questions I already answered in the ad. For example, this is an e-mail I received from an interested buyer, printed in its entirety:

“What year is ur Prius and how many miles”

Not only did I cover this in the ad, I covered it in the *title* of the ad. I now know why so many Craigslist ads are really short: the more you write, the more you have to repeat yourself via e-mail. Usually, I dealt with these people by forwarding along ads for penis enlargement pills.

3. Lowballers. The very first e-mail I received on the Prius was from a guy who asked if he could buy it for two grand. I replied by asking “What part?” Interestingly, he never got back to me.

That guy wasn’t the only lowballer. Over the next few days, I received offers ranging from $500 to $2,500, all sight-unseen from people who insisted they could pay “in cash, today.” This piqued my curiosity. Of *course* the buyer would be paying in cash. I’m not a bank – right? Wrong, as I discovered when I started hearing…

4. Sob stories. I just wanted to sell a car. Instead, I had to listen to a wide variety of downtrodden stories that usually started with “My husband lost his job” and ended with “and then the walrus just carried our youngest child out to sea.” Then the childless, jobless, and sometimes limbless person on the other end would ask if I could possibly accept $38.75 for the Prius, along with weekly installments of “whatever we can pay.”

I declined these offers, largely because I expected “whatever we can pay” would quickly turn into *“I’m sorry. Your call cannot be completed as dialed.”* And $38.75 isn’t enough for the Prius, unless you’re paying

the guy who did the bodywork.

5. People who wouldn't get back to me. I dealt with a wide variety of people who just wouldn't e-mail me back. This included a couple supposedly returning from missionary work in Africa, a guy whose Facebook profile picture was a self shot he took while smoking pot, and a piano teacher who believed no sentence was truly complete unless it ended with at least 14 periods. Really, it's a wonder these people weren't more reliable.

I also got a call every few days from a man in South Carolina who swore he would "be in Atlanta soon," at which point he would pay my full asking price for the Prius. This went on for about a month until he abruptly stopped calling, presumably because he actually looked at the photos in the ad.

As of this writing, the Prius has been for sale for over a month, and every passing day brings more wasted time dealing with people who will, under no circumstances, actually buy the car. I will now accept any amount of money for it, though I will *not* accept the car's cash value in penis enlargement pills. To ensure that I'm not asked, I've finally listed it on AutoTrader. Goodbye, Craigslist: I won't be coming back. Unless, of course, I'm feeling self-conscious about my manhood.

13. Driving in Manhattan

I believe that driving in Manhattan is one of the most enjoyable things a human being can do. I know what you're thinking: *this guy is crazy*. (Or possibly: *This looks long. Is there a video?*) But you probably already knew I was crazy after I admitted owning an E63 AMG wagon, which is like flushing money down a 507-horsepower toilet with seven seats.

But I'm not crazy: I just love the real-life video game that is Manhattan driving. Allow me to explain.

Part of the reason it's so much fun to drive in Manhattan is traffic enforcement. In short, there isn't any. Whenever you get pulled over in your suburb for doing 41 in a 35, you have to restrain yourself from screaming at the officer: *"Don't you have anything BETTER to do?!"* In Manhattan, they do. They have robberies to solve, murderers to catch, and streets to shut down for *Law & Order* filming.

The other road users also make it fun. That's especially true of taxi drivers, who would be easily identifiable simply based on their driving style even if they weren't confined to bright yellow cars.

I've learned there are three important tenets of cab driving in New York, aside from having loud conversations over an ear-mounted Bluetooth in a third-world accent that would probably earn an intrepid fondling from the TSA. One, drive fast. Two, don't signal. And three, constantly demonstrate to whoever is in front of you that your horn is working, regardless of whether it's a police car, a hot dog vendor or an elderly, disabled woman crossing the street on a walk sign. And don't worry about offending: all three will gladly return your honk with a middle finger.

Also interesting are the MTA bus drivers. They enter traffic at random intervals, typically because their mirrors were taken off years earlier by a speeding bicycle messenger. Speaking of bicycle messengers, these are Manhattan's fastest drivers, particularly because they don't let little things like traffic lights and pedestrians slow them down. And a shout-out to black cabs, or "car services," whose dark-colored Lincolns offer a touch more class as the drivers yell "fuck you!" to tourists who commit sins like asking for directions.

But there's one group that enhances driving in Manhattan more than

all of the others: the suburb-dwelling SUV. They're all the same: a late-model MDX with an obscenely ugly "bumper guard" and an obtrusive license plate frame from the Acura dealer in Syosset. They're often driven by women disoriented by the frenetic pace of the cab drivers and bicycle messengers. And they're almost always going slower than everything in sight.

Finding an SUV from the suburbs is great because it gives you confidence. You can't faze the cabbies or the car services. But you can speed by the suburb-dwelling SUV, honking and flexing your Manhattan-driving muscle. And when the suburban moms who drive these SUVs go home to Nassau County, *you'll be the reason* they complain to their friends after Pilates about what The City "is becoming." Now that's a feather in your cap.

It's not just other drivers and the lack of traffic enforcement that makes Manhattan fun. There are also no discernible speed limits, which means that everyone assigns their own – and the general consensus appears to be "as fast as possible." This is especially true for the West Side Highway and FDR Drive, which can only be described as outright free-for-alls designed to test the limits of aging Crown Victorias.

Other rules are similarly nonexistent. Parking is strictly enforced, though large vans and trucks stop anywhere at any time, constantly turning the roads into an obstacle course. And while there *are* lanes, signaling when you change between them is something they only do in Connecticut.

Unfortunately for those of us that love driving in Manhattan – a small group that includes, well, me – the city is starting to put a stop to some of the things that make it so fun. The closure of Times Square means you can no longer do high-speed runs down the length of Broadway. Not that you would. Honking for no reason is now illegal, although this is enforced with the same fervor as pickpocketing. (*"Tough luck, lady. Welcome to the big city."*) And Mayor Bloomberg continues to hire more police officers, meaning they can't *all* be roping off streets for *Law & Order*, and some are actually out enforcing traffic laws.

But until they pry the keys out of my hands – or kick the cars out of Manhattan – I'll always love driving there. You can call me crazy, but you'll have to catch me first.

14. 2002 Mercedes-Benz G500 – Review

I once owned a 2002 Mercedes G500. This was – obviously – a horrible idea that we'll cover in detail in the ensuing review. But first, a little history about one of the most instantly recognizable vehicles on the road.

While most people think the G-Wagen ("G" for "Gelandewagen," German for "cross-country vehicle") was designed as a German military vehicle, that isn't strictly true. Instead, it was suggested in the early 1970s by the Shah of Iran. And by "suggested" I probably mean "commissioned under threat of death." Eventually, the German military did use the G-Wagen, which meant it wasn't long before wealthy people wanted to drive it on paved roads.

While Europeans started buying the G-Wagens as a posh fashion statement in the 1980s, Americans didn't have that option. Instead, a New Mexico-based company called Europa imported them mainly for wealthy Aspen residents, while Mercedes dragged its feet on getting the G-Wagen certified for sale. Finally, the four-door G-Wagen came stateside in 2002, providing an ultimate aspiration for the "bling" set.

Indeed, the G500 has found favor primarily among basketball stars and five-foot-tall women with handbags the size of sofa cushions. This is a bastardization of its original purpose, but what does Mercedes care? Virtually every unit is pure profit, since the tooling was paid off about the same time Reagan implored Gorbachev to "tear down this wall." Hell, a G-Wagen probably drove him to the speech.

Why Did I Want It?

Answering the question of why I wanted a G-Wagen is a bit of a challenge. I freely admit that part of it is because I just *knew* it would make me look cool. In retrospect, of course, this is rather embarrassing. Instead, I looked – as described by one former colleague – "like a total douchebag." But it seemed awesome at the time, sort of like when a kid would show up to second-grade class picture day wearing a cape.

There were also two highly functional reasons for the G-Wagen. One is that I live in Atlanta where it snows, on average, approximately 0.1 inches per year. But one year, it snowed a lot. And because I had a Porsche (and because the city's snowplow fleet appears to consist solely of a '99 Silverado with a fuel leak), I couldn't venture outside for days. So I bought the G500 in early December, vowing *this year would be different.*

The only possibly legitimate reason for buying the G500 was that it is, as a point of fact, the ultimate off-roader. With three locking differentials, it can un-stick itself from basically any situation – a fact owners tend to discover when they run over a parking curb at Starbucks. But I had grander plans: after off-road adventures with an old Land Cruiser I briefly owned, I wanted to enjoy the G-Wagen on some rough terrain.

On the Outside

The G-Wagen's styling is opinion splitting and greatly depends on how attractive you find a file cabinet. That's because the G-Wagen's design

is based on one, sharing things like right angles and protruding door handles. Actually, given the G-Wagen's age, the file cabinet may have come second.

There are three things I love about the G-Wagen's design. One is the satisfying click of the doors closing – a sound that simply says "job well done," whether it's to German troops who just destroyed an enemy village or Beverly Hills housewives who just bought some Prada shoes.

I also love everything about the spare tire cover, which foregoes the canvas or cheap plastic used by rivals. Instead, it's a heavy, body-colored piece of metal that spells out "Mercedes-Benz" in fine printing. This gives the peasants something to read when they're stuck behind you in traffic. They certainly won't see over you.

But the best exterior element is the front turn signals. They're not integrated into the headlights; instead, they're mounted on top of the fenders, serving as a constant reminder that your car is *so hardcore* that it didn't originally come with turn signals. On AMG models, they're covered in tiny little brush guards, which makes about as much sense as bringing a baseball glove to an MLB game. Of course, AMG owners would probably offer similar logic as the glove wearers: *you never know when you might need it.*

Climbing In

Considering the G-Wagen's militaristic exterior styling, its interior is surprisingly tame. For the most part, you'd think you were sitting in any other Mercedes – that is, once you make the steep climb to the interior. Small people must take a running start. But it's OK, because they're rewarded with that awesome door latch sound.

Naturally, there are a few vestigial military items inside. For example: the grab handle in the passenger-side dashboard is so firmly welded in place that it may be structural. And the turn signal stalk requires the strength of a German soldier to push. This is largely a non-issue, since it's not like most G-Wagen drivers plan on using it.

Mercedes has, however, taken a few steps to give the civilian G-Wagen's cabin less of a "United Nations peacekeeper" look. For example: the grab handle includes a strip of fake wood. Quaint.

On the Road

Driving a G-Wagen is one of the single worst experiences the very rich must have to endure on a day-to-day basis. I'll get to the fuel economy, the handling and the acceleration. But the worst part about the G-Wagen is the sheer terror created by its vertical side windows.

Here's what happens. You're driving along in the middle lane and you want to change lanes to the right. At the same time, a car is passing you on the left. No big deal, right? In a G-Wagen, it *is* a big deal. That's because you see the left-passing car reflected in your *passenger side window*. Suddenly you have no idea where you're being passed, or by whom. All you can hope is that it will end soon without making you do anything crazy, like use a turn signal.

And it will, because you will quickly have to stop for fuel. I know this is well-covered territory in a G-Wagen review, but holy crap is this thing thirsty. There are two reasons for this: one, in addition to sharing styling and door handles with the aforementioned file cabinet, it also borrows wind resistance; and two, it weighs about as much as Honduras. Seriously: the G-Wagen's curb weight is nearly three times that of the Lotus I had before it.

Interestingly, this doesn't cause a major problem on twisty roads. On the contrary, I was stunned to find the G-Wagen to be unusually maneuverable in nearly all circumstances. Going in, I expected the G-Wagen to handle like a Lake Powell houseboat, or possibly worse, like a 1980s Chrysler. But really, it steers like a big E-Class. That may not sound like a compliment, but it's high praise for a vehicle that came out when the Lincoln Versailles heralded "entry-level luxury."

In fact, the weight is more of a problem when you're driving in a straight line. The big issues start around 35 miles per hour, when the G's perpetually increasing momentum and immense mass forces you to take an entirely new look at the personal responsibility of driving. If someone walks out in front of you, they're dead. If someone *drives* out in front of you, they're probably also dead. And the brakes aren't up to the task of saving them.

The G-Wagen is scariest on a downhill, where it picks up speed as if you're about mid-stab on the throttle. Actually, it's probably worse in AMG form, since that adds sports-car acceleration to dangerous visibility, tremendous weight and limited braking power. But at least it includes brush guards for the turn signals.

Verdict

I understand the G-Wagen's allure. It's ready for anything. It's unusual. And it makes you look cool. But having owned one, I can dispel each of those rumors.

For one, it's not ready for anything. Mine came from Boston, and it had so much rust on the undercarriage that it looked like Robert Ballard had brought back my G-Wagen frame as a souvenir from the *Titanic*. Before I could ever do any real off-roading, I had to sell mine to CarMax, where it probably disintegrated.

Beyond the rust, G-Wagens are surprisingly fragile. Window regulators break every eleven weeks and cost about a grand to fix. The door locks work as if they were designed by Land Rover. And with every trip off road, you'll worry that you've just broken something that will cost $1,800 and requires a special part from Germany. One positive remark, however: except for the rust, the above doesn't apply to old school G-Wagens. Those can really handle nearly everything you can throw at them, like, just as an example, the Polish terrain.

The other common misconception about the G-Wagen is that it makes you look cool. It doesn't. In fact, I've never been more self-conscious driving a vehicle in my entire life. You may like the idea of everyone assuming you're a rich asshole. You probably also fake tan and wear Ed Hardy T-shirts that depict a fire-breathing dragon riding a motorcycle and fighting a turtle skeleton with red eyes. For me, the G-Wagen's image didn't match my personality.

Of course, you may not have the same problems as I did, whether it's rust, image, or driving experience. As with anything, your mileage may vary. Unless we're strictly speaking about gas mileage. Then it won't vary. It will be dismal.

15. Atlanta's Secret Roads

When I tell people I live in Atlanta, I'm typically met with one of two reactions. The first is a visible look of disgust. The second is also a visible look of disgust, but it's followed by a nice reply, such as: *"Oh, I once had a layover there!"* or possibly: *"Oh, I once was supposed to have a layover there, but I told my travel agent to change it because I was afraid of being murdered in the terminal!"* I respond to this by saying: who the hell uses travel agents anymore?

Presumably, people are so negative about Atlanta because they have, at some point, read one of those USA Today infographics that use a brightly colored pie chart to display violent crime statistics. And I must admit that violent crime is one area in which Atlanta excels. But this isn't always a bad thing. For example: let's say you wake up one day and think to yourself: *It's been way too long since my last mugging.* A trip to Atlanta will likely solve that problem, and by "that problem," I mean the one in which you are capable of forming thoughts.

But Atlanta has more than just violent crime: we also have property crime. In fact, we're quickly becoming a force in the property crime world, which has been dominated for too long by Detroit and inner-city Venezuela.

Of course, I am kidding. Atlanta's crime rate isn't so bad. In fact, the city is known for many things completely unrelated to crime. For example: there's a booming music industry where dozens of famous artists got their start by yelling profanity into a studio microphone. And, of course, there's heat, which keeps most southerners inside all summer, except when they have to go to a country music show.

You've probably realized that none of these things relate to cars. As a car enthusiast, you're probably thinking that Atlanta doesn't really seem like the place to be. That's especially true if you check the local Craigslist, which primarily consists of:

1. Grand Ams.
2. Aleros.
3. Chryslers without titles.

But while you might think Atlanta is devoid of any automotive happenings, except possibly leading US cities in carjackings, I am here to inform you that's not entirely true. For proof, I will share a secret known only to an elite group of car enthusiasts; a shadowy, clandestine faction that consists of me, my friends, and basically anyone who asks. And that secret is: Atlanta has spectacular roads.

Atlanta's finest roads snake through its wealthiest neighborhoods, where homes have tennis courts, swimming pools, enormous yard signs for local Republican candidates, and at least one Dodge Neon parked out front that belongs to the maid. The roads also offer four key benefits to us car enthusiasts:

1. They're tremendously well paved because the wealthy insist on it, even though they (the wealthy, not the roads) primarily drive sport-utility vehicles that could, in a pinch, cross the Andes.

2. They're very curvy (the roads, not the wealthy) because the wealthy don't want anyone to drive through their neighborhoods for any reason, unless they're the lawn service.

3. They're totally free of police, who are busy solving violent crimes in other areas of the city, where people sell Chryslers without titles.

4. The houses surrounding the roads are all incredibly far back from the street, which means that, as you blast by at 2 am, the wealthy aren't roused from their Ambien-induced sleep.

So Atlanta's back roads are great fun for driving. But they've also provided a setting for some rather unusual occurrences. For instance:

The Drunk Woman in the Lexus

I was once driving on the roads late at night in my Lotus when I heard a "clang" from under the car. This wasn't unusual because the Lotus was so low it scraped everything, even when it was sitting still. But there was quickly a second clang, then a third. Then I reached the cause of the clanging.

Stopped in the road with its hazard lights on was a Lexus RX330 that was tilted to one side. Behind the RX330 was a trail of parts that probably would've retailed for $1,100 at a Lexus dealer, or $95 at a Toyota dealer. I got out to investigate and discovered a well-dressed woman examining the front of the SUV.

"Are you OK?"

"Yeaaah, yeaaaaaah, I'm fiiiiiine…." she replied. "The front… it just… it just… it fell off."

I looked where she was looking. The front end of her car was destroyed. Her tire, wheel *and brake disc* were totally gone. The car was leaning to one side because she had been driving on the wheel hub, which was digging into the pavement for blocks. The clanging sound was from chunks of her undercarriage, which was breaking apart as she drove. Presumably, she hit something and kept going even as her car disintegrated beneath her.

"Do you need me to call someone?"

"Noooo…. I'm fine…. You… you don't worry about meeeeee…"

I wished her luck, returned to the Lotus, and called the police. They showed up a few minutes later and arrested her for DUI. I never did find out her name or what happened to her, but the miles-long gash in the pavement is still there. It's the only pockmark on an otherwise perfect road.

The Wildlife

I should mention that this part of Atlanta is a forest. I know what

you're thinking: *Don't you mean there are a bunch of well-manicured trees that look lovely when the leaves change colors?* And the answer is: who uses the word "lovely" anymore? No, really, this is an actual forest, and there's a roughly 80 percent chance that Bigfoot is hiding out somewhere in it and feeding off wealthy peoples' trash, which consists primarily of Land Rover parts.

I mention this because I have, on several occasions while driving on my favorite curvy roads, encountered animals. Of course, I've seen deer. Deer are everywhere in the United States, sort of like acne, or insects, or – if you're in Atlanta – violent criminals.

But deer aren't very interesting, unless they're faced with the possibility of an encounter with an automobile. In that case, they take time out of their normal schedule of eating grass to run as quickly as possible *towards* the approaching vehicle. Seriously: I don't know where this "deer in the headlights" crap comes from. The deer I know (their names are Steve and Laura) appear to believe that the only appropriate response to seeing a car is to greet it with enthusiasm, preferably by jumping directly in its path.

The most intriguing animal I encountered on my favorite roads was an owl. Here's what happened:

1. I saw it and thought: *Oh look, there's an owl!*
2. I hit it with my car.

Before you get angry, I should explain that it wasn't my fault. I was driving along, minding my own business, when I noticed the owl in the trees. As I approached, it apparently summoned its inner deer persona and flew down to greet my car. I believe it bounced off the windshield, but I decided not to stop and check, in case it turned out to be traveling with a posse.

Fortunately, I redeemed my animal karma a few nights later, when – as I cruised along, minding my own business (I do this a lot) – I noticed a … *something* … in the road. I turned around to examine it more closely and saw that the object sitting in the middle of the street was a turtle.

So I sprung into action, doing what any person would do if they had a guilty conscience about recently killing an owl. Namely, I stopped my car behind the turtle, got out, and – too grossed out to touch it – started yelling words of encouragement.

This consisted of: “YOU CAN DO IT!” and “COME ON, TURTLE! CROSS!” But eventually it changed to “FOR GOD’S SAKE STOP TAKING BREAKS!” after the turtle stopped about a dozen times while crossing the road to rest. Eventually it made it to the other side and I posted a photo of it on Facebook, primarily to change the mind of anyone who heard the owl story.

The 911 into the Tree

The low point of my time on Atlanta’s finest roads came when I crashed my Porsche 911 into a tree. I alluded to this in my Elise Across America story, but I suppose it’s worth a further mention here.

To start, it’s important to remind you that this area is, in fact, a forest. This is true of all of Atlanta. The next time you have a layover here, consider looking out the window (with one hand up to shield yourself from gunfire). You will discover Atlanta is little more than a complex network of approximately 40 million trees, all of which will, one day, fall to the ground and crush your mailbox.

I blame the trees for the crash. As I recall (and the details are a little hazy now, largely because I’ve tried to block them out), I picked the 911 up on a Monday. It was a Guards Red convertible with a black interior, brand-new from my employer, Porsche Cars North America, who – upon being informed I was going to quit and become a writer – asked: *You’re not going to write about us, are you?*

I had a busy week, so the first time I could drive the 911 was on a rainy Thursday evening. Now, in your city, a rainy evening probably means something like: “Put on your wipers.” But in Atlanta, it means: “Put on your wipers and watch for fallen trees the size of a tour bus.” So I did just that.

But I wasn’t watching carefully enough, because I came around a bend and there, lying across the road, was an enormous tree. Even though I pushed the brakes with all the force I could, I hit it anyway. In fact, I drove over most of the branches, stopping just short of the trunk. The next day, as I drove the battered car to work – with less than 90 miles on the odometer – I had to clear some branches out of the interior.

That Porsche, by the way, was eventually fixed and sold to someone who probably will one day advertise it as “always garaged.” In fact, you, dear reader, could be unknowingly driving it, completely

unaware that it once performed a greater off-roading feat than most Land Rovers ever will. But don't be too upset, as there's some good news: at least it escaped Atlanta without bullet holes.

16. Pebble Beach: The Automotive Pilgrimage

Part 1: Getting There

"Pilgrimage" is defined by Webster's as: *a journey, especially a long one, made to some sacred place as an act of religious devotion.* Meanwhile, "author" is defined as: *someone who still thinks quoting Webster's is a clever opening line.*

I'm very familiar with pilgrimages. This isn't due to my religious faith, which consists primarily of saying "Thank God" when I see my luggage on the carousel. Instead, it's because I live in Atlanta, a crucial waypoint along the noted *Honey, we're going to Florida* pilgrimage. This is undertaken each winter by virtually every Canadian, whose goal appears to be: reach Atlanta at precisely rush hour in the largest vehicle currently available. That may sound annoying, but there's a bright side: Canadians always use their turn signals.

It's no surprise that Canadians make the pilgrimage to Florida. That's because every year, around Halloween, Canada undergoes a massive transformation. One moment, it's a lush, beautiful nation filled with people who apologize to one another for things like walking onto an occupied elevator. The next, it's a giant freezer that requires donning snowshoes to get to work, where your boss will apologize for the weather. Clearly, the only logical reaction is to head south in a Chevrolet Suburban, even if you're a retired couple whose grown children are making the very same journey next week towing a fishing vessel behind their decommissioned school bus.

I was pondering all this a few years ago while driving home from work. There, stuck behind a 36-foot mobile home covered in road salt, I was hit with a realization: *I must make an automotive pilgrimage.* And so I began planning a visit to Pebble Beach.

The Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, for the unaware, is possibly the nation's most pretentiously named automotive event, fielding a challenge from only the Hilton Head Island Motoring Festival. Pebble Beach takes place every August near Monterey, California, where the weather ranges from "slightly misty" to "moderately misty." Actually, this isn't totally true: the sun has been known to come out on occasion, leading the wealthy crowd to jump for joy and promptly fall over, what with the grass all wet from years of accumulated slight

mist.

But if you get beyond the mist, and the pretentious naming, and of course the mist, the Pebble Beach Concours is revered among car enthusiasts for its wide array of incredibly impractical, unreliable vehicles that cost approximately the same as all the real estate in West Virginia added together. Therefore, I had to make the pilgrimage. So I did. And this is what happened.

Pebble Beach's main events are a car race on Saturday followed by a car show on Sunday, with nightly auctions in between. I began my trip by arriving in Los Angeles on Thursday. Intrepid readers will note this is several days too early and the completely wrong part of California, to which I would reply: *Where the hell were you when I was booking the ticket?*

Just kidding. My flight to Los Angeles had been carefully planned so I could meet up with my friend Dan, who lives in Santa Barbara and has an old Volvo that's powered by a Chevy V8. (It should be noted that *all* car enthusiasts have a friend with an old Volvo powered by a Chevy V8, which is almost always the result of drunken Craigslist browsing.)

We would drive up the coast together, heading towards the same event but in completely separate cars. This is standard practice in California, where a married couple will go to the grocery store together in separate Priuses, just so each person can be seen saving the planet.

Unfortunately, I wasn't very excited by the rental car choices at the Los Angeles airport. The Fiat 500, for example, is a good deal at $200 per month, but less so at $200 per weekend. And I wasn't about to rent some stripper Nissan Altima and whrrrrrrrrrrr up the coast listening to the CVT. Perhaps the coolest choice at LAX was a Chevy Tahoe. But if I picked it, the body roll would've induced me to vomit at nearly every scenic overlook along the Pacific Coast Highway. So Dan and I did what any sane, logical car enthusiasts would do: we bought a car.

More specifically, *Dan* bought a car. I merely egged him on from Atlanta, saying things like: *"Yeah, get that old Jaguar! And a fire extinguisher!"* This is because I knew the alternative was a silver Hertz Camry whose prior maintenance involved a) noticing the check engine light was on, and b) turning it off.

Eventually, Dan chose a late 1990s BMW 528i station wagon with around 214,000 miles on it. But we could breathe easily, because these miles were assured to be "all highway," which I believe is a default Craigslist used car description, right between "ran when parked" and "the a/c just needs a charge."

In addition to its high mileage, the BMW had some color issues. Most notably, the exterior was gray, while the interior had been painted blue. You read that right: the wagon's entire *interior* had been painted blue. Yes, they painted the seats. There was overspray on the seat belts.

The plan was that I would pay Dan instead of Hertz, and he would sell the car once we returned, thereby breaking even. Clearly, this couldn't miss.

We set out for Pebble Beach on Friday morning. I was driving the BMW and Dan was in a Scion FR-S he had for his job, which involves setting residual values and taking manufacturer vehicles on long, presumably tax deductible, road trips.

Initially, I felt like I had gotten the better deal, since the FR-S's cabin was finished in some dull color that didn't give off any noxious fumes when it got warm. But it wasn't long before I realized the BMW had a major fault: its CD player was broken. As there's no radio on California's Central Coast, the majority of the drive would consist of me alone with my thoughts until the paint fumes took over and I was no longer capable of forming any thoughts, or blinking.

We stopped for lunch in San Luis Obispo. This would be the last city until we reached our destination in Monterey, unless you count Big Sur as a city, which no one does except those who include hemp as part of the population. In that case, it would be bigger than Chicago.

The local specialty in San Luis Obispo (referred to the locals as “SLO," or “slow,” which is an appropriate description of life there) is a sandwich called the “tri tip.” This appeared in every way to be exactly the same as a standard barbecue sandwich. I didn’t bring this up to the locals. I did, however, mention the broken CD player to Dan.

“So,” I said, as we ate, “the CD player in the BMW doesn’t work.”

“Yeah,” said Dan, as he prepared to take an enormous bite. “Radio, though.”

“Yeah. Not much radio on the coast.”

“No,” replied Dan, mouth full of tri tip. “No.”

The empathy between us was strong.

After lunch, we continued up the coast, driving past beautiful cliffs and crashing waves at roughly nine miles per hour. This was because the road was comprised entirely of construction, which they do year-round in California to make sure residents don’t think their tax revenue is being wasted.

The one benefit of the silence and crawling pace was that I became thoroughly acquainted with my BMW wagon. Here’s the lowdown, for any of you considering one. Number one: power. There is none. Well, not none; apparently this thing had 190 horses from the factory – but that was a lot of highway miles ago. And the 528 is done no favors by its automatic transmission, which may actually be a group of small men at each wheel armed with tiny oars. Slow-witted was never a better description for anything, except maybe a Canadian driving an RV through Atlanta rush hour.

Fortunately, handling is a strong point. Even after covering the distance to the moon, the 528iT still felt tight and ready for action, as long as said action didn’t involve any acceleration. Want to do figure-eights in a small parking lot? The E39 (that’s BMW speak for “BMW 5-Series wagon, and look how cool I am because I know the secret

codes") is your car.

Switchgear was also a big plus. Everything felt solid and appropriately tightened, or – as an old German man would say – *"just like ze Germans built it."* The exceptions were the temperature gauge, which indicated negative 40 degrees, and the LCD screen in the gauge cluster, which told me to "F ST N Y UR S T B LT." Also, the 528iT holds the title of "Best Car I've Ever Driven With Painted Seats." Unfortunately, it's also the worst.

As I was musing about the wagon's pros and cons, I noticed that, for the first time in four hours, the radio was playing something other than static. The Central Coast's gray clouds gave way to even more gray clouds – but this time, there was also something else: a slight mist. We had arrived in Pebble Beach.

Being a car enthusiast in Monterey during Pebble Beach weekend feels like being a Lego man wandering around a large collection of AutoArt diecast car models: there are a lot of very detailed expensive cars, and you own none of them. Also, you're always smiling.

Driving to our hotel, for example, involved sitting behind a long-wheelbase Ferrari 250 GT California Spider, a Morgan Aeromax and a Mercedes 300SL Roadster in a traffic jam that could only be described as an auto insurer's worst nightmare. There were also a lot of Fiat 500s driven by people who *didn't* find $200 per weekend prohibitively expensive. As they listened to their CDs and iPods while not inhaling paint fumes, I understood why.

I turned on our hotel's street to discover, mixed in with the Toyota Priuses and Ford Mustang rental cars, the following five vehicles parked near one another: two 1960s Shelby Mustangs, a Maserati Quattroporte, a Ferrari F430, and a one-of-19 left-hand-drive Aston-Martin DB5 Volante. Our hotel's valet had a McLaren F1 parked in front. Nervously, I pulled up in the BMW. The valet got inside. "Did you *paint* these seats?"

Part 2: The Scene

Unless you're rich, not much goes on the Friday before Pebble Beach's weekend festivities. I say this because the main event on Friday is a car show everyone refers to as "The Quail," which sounds like the kind of thing that requires you to don an ascot before entering. But it actually requires you to pay $400, which is apparently what a ticket

costs.

Interestingly, I spoke to dozens of people who attended the Quail, and not one paid full price. Every single person I talked to said something like: *"I got in for free because I'm friends with the guy who delivers the chairs."* As a result, I suspect the $400 entry fee is designed to scare away riffraff driving 200,000-mile BMWs, while the actual ticket price is much lower, or free if you're wearing an ascot.

But the scare tactic worked, and we stayed away. Instead, we went to the nearby RM Auction, which is one of the many high-dollar car auctions at Pebble Beach. Outside, a radio broadcasted the British-accented auctioneer saying things like: *"One million, do I hear one point one? Do I hear one point one? Come on, blue shirt, it's just another hundred grand, what else are you going to do with it?"* This was often successful. Needless to say, the Occupy protests hadn't reached Pebble Beach.

Browsing through the RM Auction's cars for sale required an entry fee, which we could afford even though we weren't friends with the guy who delivered *anything*. The collection included a Porsche 996 GT1, a Mercedes CLK-GTR, a bright green Lamborghini Miura and one of my favorite cars of all time: a 1966 Lamborghini 350 GT. Unfortunately, RM Auctions strictly prohibits trades for vehicles with painted seats.

We also stopped by the auction's early 1900s cars, which are virtually indistinguishable to the naked eye but boast wheels and tires so large they may have once been used to steer a clipper ship. Most importantly, they can sell between $10,000 and $1 million, depending almost entirely on how excited the auctioneer gets.

Our next stop was the parking garage at the RM Auction, which is one of the few places you'll see a Lamborghini Miura parked next to a Toyota Camry. Of course, this is also possible at the Dubai airport, though the Miura will be covered in two inches of dust.

The Miura-next-to-Camry sight was repeated over and over on the streets of Monterey and nearby Carmel that evening. We walked around for hours saying things like *"That guy is parking his Ferrari 330 GTC on the street!"* This never got old. It was 1 a.m. before we returned to our hotel, having photographed every classic Ferrari in existence parked next to every rental car available at the San Francisco International Airport.

Part 3: The Historics

Saturday, some might argue, is the pinnacle day of the Pebble Beach event. Actually, this is not open to argument, since I woke up to the sound of an Ariel Atom revving outside my hotel room. This, ladies and gentlemen, is a wake-up-call.

The main Saturday event is called the Monterey Historics, which takes place at Laguna Seca Raceway a few miles east of Monterey. Or it *was* called the Monterey Historics. Apparently sponsorship recently took over, so now it's called something like the Papa John's Monterey Classic, a name that is only used by Papa John's employees. Sponsorship has also come to Laguna Seca Raceway, now officially *Mazda* Laguna Seca Raceway. This is ignored by everyone in attendance, many of whom are stunned to discover Mazda still exists.

Here's what happens at the Monterey Historics: you arrive, expecting to see old race cars driving around Laguna Seca. Instead, you park in a dusty parking lot directly next to a Ferrari 246 Dino and a Panoz Esperante. You quickly realize there's just as much to see outside the

event as inside, which turns into a two-hour stroll through the parking lot before you walk in.

Here are some of the highlights from my parking lot wandering:

1. A Mercedes 300SL Roadster with dents, scratches, and a tattered interior. It's owned by a man who bought it 30 years ago and apparently believes duct tape is an appropriate weatherstripping material.

2. A 2005ish Range Rover convertible. Yes, a full convertible, with a soft top. Having laid eyes on this, I am absolutely certain it exists, but cannot begin to explain the reasons why. Except the obvious "*Honey, I miss my convertible, but I love my Range Rover…"*

3. A Porsche Carrera GT, parked in the dusty parking lot next to a Chevrolet Equinox rental car (but I repeat myself).

4. A Lamborghini Jalpa, which actually looked quite nice, and there's one on eBay that isn't that expensive, and it's only a few hundred miles away, and really it can't be *that* bad to maintain, and maybe I'll just call on it…

5. A Volkswagen Touareg V10 TDI, which apparently managed to move under its own power long enough to get to the event. Presumably, a Volkswagen mechanic was on call nearby.

6. The largest collection of late-model station wagons in existence. This included an E55 AMG wagon, an Audi S6 Avant and – unbelievably – more than one Ferrari FF, likely purchased under the promise of: "If you buy this, we swear you'll get a LaFerrari."

I eventually entered the raceway after paying $40, which was reduced from $50 if I promised to call it the Papa John's Monterey Classic the entire time I was there.

This event was, as expected, the highlight of the trip. Here's what happens: you walk around Laguna Seca Raceway and watch Ferraris and Porsches from the 1960s being driven at tremendously high speeds by rich guys who don't mind if they crash them.

Sometimes the rich guys *do* crash them, resulting in empathy from many spectators until the rich guys climb in their *other* car so they can compete in the next race. At one point, a driver crashed his million-

dollar Shelby Daytona, got out, jumped in his 1960s Ferrari, entered the next race, and won.

But it's not all cars from the '60s. The day's early races feature cars that ran in the Indianapolis 500 back when half the competitors had four legs. OK, maybe that isn't true. But there *were* century-old cars racing, and they ambled around the track at roughly the same speed as the track marshal, who drove a scooter covered in Mazda decals.

Beyond the race cars, the infield was filled with countless "paddocks" devoted to certain car brands. The Ferrari paddock included about six Daytonas, a 575 Superamerica, and a lot of men wearing red shoes. The BMW paddock was full of people complaining about the cost of the fine for not using a turn signal in California. And the "Italian car" paddock had not one but *two* Maserati Biturbos, presumably the last two running examples on Earth.

Of course, there were also the usual race day happenings, such as women riding in golf carts while looking incredibly bored, and, of course, hot dogs that cost as much as John Gary's initial spaceflight.

After about eight hours of walking through parking lots, watching 1940s race cars crash into tire walls and paying $39 for Papa John's Monterey Classic at Laguna Mazda Seca Mazdaway commemorative french fry cups, I decided it was time to go. Dan and I walked back to the BMW and headed towards nearby Carmel, where we would eat dinner under a slight mist and excitedly photograph a Mercedes SLR parked next to a Volkswagen Jetta with hubcaps.

Part 4: The Concours

In theory, the highlight of the week should be Sunday, when the actual Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance takes place. And I admit that this, too, is a great event, even though there are a few issues.

Parking is by far the largest. Here's what happens: you and everyone else in northern California drives in the general direction of the Pebble Beach Golf Club, which is probably where the event takes place. No one knows for sure, and a lot of people never find out, because they have to park in Santa Cruz and walk the rest of the way.

OK, it's not that bad. But it isn't pretty.

You park along 17-Mile-Drive, which is a winding road that spans the

length of several golf courses in the Pebble Beach area. This poses an issue because the event is on about Mile 1, and you park on about Mile 16, unless you arrive at 7 a.m. or have a Jeep that you leave on the seventh fairway. Worse, reaching a parking spot involves following behind 15 miles of traffic, which reminded me of sitting in Atlanta behind a Quebec-plated motorhome the size of a middle school.

Because you're now very far from anything except driftwood, seagulls, and perfectly groomed golf courses, you must then board a bus back to the event. Except the bus has to sit *in the same traffic that you just did*, which means that the very act of parking has now taken at least an hour. After experiencing this, I'm now convinced that the main benefit of entering your car in the actual Concours is that you don't have to deal with parking.

But once you're inside, parking is the last thing on your mind. Instead, you're staring at a bunch of old cars and thinking: *Why the hell am I so cold?* The answer, of course, is the famed Pebble Beach Mist, typically paired with the Pebble Beach Cold. While these may sound like minor league baseball teams, they're actual types of weather, as certified by the Official Pebble Beach Department of Things That Come From the Sky.

I know what you're thinking: *It's California in August. It can't be that cold! And that isn't a real department*. And I concede: it's possible that you're right about that last thing. But *I'm* right about the temperature, as I will now demonstrate using Wikipedia, the finest source for information aside from eyewitness testimony. (Really, ask any attorney: eyewitnesses are tremendously consistent and rarely wrong. For example, upon reading this, Dan e-mailed to tell me the interior of the BMW had been painted gray, while the *exterior* was blue. Fifty years ago, one of us would've sworn the shot came from the book depository, while the other would've blamed Governor Connally.)

Anyway, back to Wikipedia. It turns out the average August temperature in Monterey is just 67 degrees. This is only slightly higher than the average August temperature in *Anchorage*, where they simultaneously hold the annual Concours d'Elegance Of Small Planes That Will Crash In The Wilderness This Year. Interestingly, Pebble Beach is only about nine miles west of Laguna Mazda Raceway at Mazdaland, where just the previous day I received a sunburn that coincidentally resembled Alaska, both in shape and overall size.

Now that we've covered the problems, it's important to mention that the Concours is a wonderful event. This is especially if you own a company that makes enormous womens' hats. And if you do, you probably got a free ticket to the Quail.

"Pebble," as it's called by people who looked like they had been before, takes place on the 18th fairway of a golf course that overlooks the Pacific Ocean. It's comprised of about 80 cars, some of which had been designed to look like birds. Seriously: one of the featured displays was vehicles driven by 1930s royalty from India, who apparently decided the biggest flaw of the day's cars was a total lack of resemblance to swans. So they set about fixing that, which involved taking a normal car and adding white feathers and an enormous swan neck. This didn't seem to bother the judges, who called the cars "truly beautiful," apparently ignoring their striking resemblance to college fraternity homecoming floats.

Of course, a few of the cars at the Concours *aren't* designed to look like swans. These are usually vehicles from the 1920s and 1930s that, despite having two seats, no crumple zones, few electronics, and tires that may have come from a mountain bike, are longer than a military helicopter.

There are also 1960s Ferraris, each of which have Montana license plates – a tax dodge apparently necessary for people whose net worth rivals The Gambia. (Coincidentally, that's the country in Africa where the dictator drives around in an S-Class that looks like a swan. Probably.)

It's not just the cars. Pebble Beach is also among the finest people-watching venues in the world. It attracts people from all classes, like the super rich, or just the very rich, who say things like: *"Honey, your Ferrari has different headlights!"* and: *"Jack, did you bring the Hispano-Suiza this year?"* or, better yet: *"This hat doubles as an umbrella!"* Proving my point, the event was hosted by Jay Leno and Edward Hermann, who probably missed Friday night dinner with Lorelai and Rory to attend.

Dan and I stayed for the entire Concours. This is a challenge because, with less than 100 cars, you can really only look at the same piece of chrome detailing so many times. But we wanted to see them award Best in Show, which went to some old Mercedes that looked like virtually every other old vehicle in attendance. It *didn't* look like the swan cars, whose feathers were getting ruffled from the rain.

With the day over, we drove back to our hotel. The next morning, we'd be back on the Pacific Coast Highway driving nine miles per hour as we waited for construction workers to carefully blast off a tiny section of rock so it wouldn't harm the silver-bellied field mouse population. (California, remember?)

The pilgrimage was over. But as we drove away, I promised myself I'd be back next year. And the year after that, and the year after that, and the year after that. Because once you've made the pilgrimage to the holy land, you can't resist doing it again. Just ask the Canadians.

17. The Cadillac and the Korean

Getting deported sucks. I know this because I recently bought a Cadillac from a guy who was getting deported, and boy did I get a good deal.

It all started when I decided to sell my 2001 Mercedes E55 AMG. The E55 was the greatest car in the history of the world for one main reason: it started every time I tried to drive it to work. This is a big deal to me, considering that my cars often develop problems overnight. Seriously: sometimes I'll drive a car in the evening, come home, go to sleep, wake up the next morning, and BAM! Needs new tires.

Anyway: forget about the E55. I certainly did. You see, as a car enthusiast, it's my duty to constantly switch cars, even if they have no discernable problems, just because I want to try something new. In this case, I wanted to try a CTS-V, which *is* your grandfather's Cadillac, except with the engine and transmission from your crazy uncle's Chevrolet Corvette Z06.

So I visited AutoTrader.com, which is where I spend approximately 90 percent of my time and 130 percent of my money. I found a 2004 model for sale locally and e-mailed the private seller, who agreed to meet me just a few hours later at my office. The quick fit perfectly with my typical speedy car-buying strategy: shock and awe. First, shock at how cool the car is, then awe at how much money it drains from my bank account. Mechanical inspection? Pah!

The Cadillac arrived around lunchtime, driven by a young Asian man in his mid-20s with a heavy Korean accent. This surprised me, because it's well known among car enthusiasts that the first-generation CTS-V is only driven by aging, bearded white guys whose wives insisted they sell the Corvette and "grow up." This was no bearded white guy, and he certainly wasn't grown up. (All of this only relates to the original CTS-V. The second-generation is driven by all kinds of people, but mostly overpaid IT analysts, or – in the case of the wagon – middling automotive journalists.)

I contained my surprise and examined the car, which was in nice shape except for some dents and scratches in typical places. On the test drive, I had the chance to ask a few questions.

“So did you buy it new?” I asked.

“No… certified pre-owned… in Seattle,” he replied.

“So you drove it out to Georgia?”

“No… transferred to California and I shipped it there. Then I shipped it here.”

“What brought you out here?” I asked, curious about the frequent moves.

“Work... consulting… but then I lost my job.”

Wait a second, I thought. *Heavy accent, transferred by his company, lost his job… I know what’s going on here!*

“So what’s next?” I asked, very aware of what his answer would be.

“Well, I have to go back to Korea.”

He’s getting deported! After years of seeing used car ads with the phrase “must sell” – which typically means “need cash to buy a dirt bike” – here’s a guy who *actually* must sell, because he will soon be living on the other side of the earth where they don’t have Cadillacs, or Cadillac dealers, or even bearded white guys!

Obviously, I was excited. The seller’s situation meant I would be pulling a CarMax with my offer, which involves a) assessing the current market situation, the car’s condition, the car’s equipment level, and the car’s mileage, and b) making an offer roughly equivalent to the cost of a used laptop computer.

When we returned from the test drive, I pointed out a few flaws to build my case for what would probably amount to the worst lowball offer in the history of used car transactions. Namely: it needs engine mounts, an expensive LED brake light is out, and it could use tires. He agreed with my assessment, and I told him I’d be in touch.

I went inside and explained the situation to my co-workers, a compassionate, hardworking group, all of whom were eager to share an opinion on how best to screw over an unemployed immigrant.

After much discussion, we all agreed that I should make an offer

roughly equal to the car's wholesale value, provided it had been in a flood, then stolen, then engine-swapped with whatever powers a ceiling fan. And so, via text message – largely because I was too embarrassed to call him – I suggested a price.

I learned two things that day. One, that not all CTS-V owners are slightly upscale rednecks who wouldn't understand why Hooters isn't an appropriate setting for a department lunch. And two, that negotiating apparently isn't a skill they teach you in consulting. Because when the dust was settled and the text messages were exchanged, we agreed on my offer plus $250. The increase was almost entirely because he had to replace a flat tire he got while driving home.

We agreed to meet that evening: I'd bring a cashier's check, and he'd bring the title and the Cadillac. But then he became suspicious.

The first sign he was wavering came when he called and told me he'd rather do the transaction at a bank. ("Too many fake cashier's checks," he said.) This annoyed me, since I had already left the office twice that day: once to test-drive the car, and once to pick up the check. Plus, we'd have to leave right away if we wanted to make it to Bank of America, where a typical branch is open from noon to 12:45, Monday through Tuesday.

I informed him that I was not pleased with the idea of meeting at a bank, and I announced in no uncertain terms that it would either be my way or the Demilitarized Zone. I mean, I didn't actually say that, and I only just thought of it now, but I wonder what he would've done if I *had* said it.

My response seemed to relax him – or perhaps intimidate him – and we hung up, agreeing to meet as planned later that day. But two hours later, the receptionist in my office called.

"Someone just called trying to verify your employment," she said.

"What?" I said. "Verify my employment?"

"Yes," she said. "He had an Asian accent. He said you were buying a car from him."

That's right: he called my office to make sure I actually work there. Fortunately, the receptionist evidently gave him no clue, which I

imagined scared him even more. I pictured him sitting at home, nervous about the prospect of flying back to Korea, discovering the check was fake, and trying to reach Bank of America by dialing the customer service number and repeatedly pressing buttons until a recording announced they were closed.

But I heard nothing more from him the rest of the day. And when I got to his place that evening, the transaction went very smoothly, in the way a transaction usually does when one party is getting a great deal and the other is in the middle of packing every single thing he owns into large boxes. I gave him the check, he gave me the car, and I was on my way.

A few days later I discovered a motorcycle helmet the seller left in the trunk. I called him, but his number was already disconnected. The deportation had occurred, and the only non-redneck ever to call a CTS-V his own was already back in Korea.

18. The Ferrari 612 is Seriously Underrated

Let's talk about summer jobs. You, dear reader, have probably had some bad ones. For example: waiting tables at a restaurant where customers believed "Accept Jesus" was a good tip. Or maybe working the Guess Your Age booth at Six Flags, spending all day on your feet just to add a few bucks to your weed fund. (To all the parents reading this, of course I jest. While all the other high school kids are smoking pot, yours would never do such a thing. Just ask them.)

I, on the other hand, had the ultimate summer job: I was paid to drive exotic cars. Seriously. One summer during college, a Ferrari dealer employed me to bring customers their cars, which consisted of all the latest high-end sports and luxury models, plus a few Maseratis.
Of course, I know what you're thinking: *Holy crap! You once held a paying job?* And the answer is: only briefly.

You're probably also thinking that it sounds like a lot of fun. But that's not quite true. You see, if they hire the right guy, he *never* has any fun. Instead, he's constantly thinking: *Ohmygod that truck is getting close ohmygod does that guy see me? OHMYGOD YELLOW LIGHT! BRAKES! CHECK THE MIRRORS!*

And that was me, from open until close, unless I was driving the shop truck. Then it was more like: *Hmm… I'm only doing 30. I wonder if I can drop it into Park.*

Now you're thinking: OK, but at least you have some cool stories to tell. But that's not true either. You see, it's absolutely impossible to mention my Ferrari job without sounding like one of those one-upper assholes who always says stuff like: *"You only just figured that out?"* Consider it:

Friend: My job rocks! We got to leave at 4 p.m. today!
Me: Oh, that's cool. I was once paid to spend four hours driving a Ferrari F430.

So I generally keep my mouth shut when the topic turns to my job, except for right now, when I'm going to tell you about the Ferrari 612 Scaglietti.

The 612 Scagelitti, for those who don't remember, is a front-engined, four-seat Ferrari that is neither front-engined nor a four-seater. It's not

front-engined because the bulk of the engine is behind the front axle due to an engine bay so enormously long that it features, in addition to the engine, a spare tire, extra leather, a Frommer's travel guide to Italy, a lightly used Fiat 500, and an Italian family provided to help translate the owner's manual. Also, it's not a four-seater because the rear seats are so tiny that you'd hear cries of pain from anything you actually placed anything back there, including a USB stick.

Now that we've covered all that, a brief review.

Let's start with styling. When I was working at the dealer, the 612 was still a brand-new car, which meant that we were actively trying to sell them. Per my best recollection, this was the sales pitch:

Customer: I'm interested in an F430.
Salesperson: I'm sorry sir, did you say 612 Scaglietti?
Customer: Absolutely not! I said F430!
Salesperson: Certainly, sir. Let me bring that 612 Scaglietti around for you.
Customer: This is absurd! I'm leaving!
Salesperson: Not a problem, sir. Can you take the 612 Scaglietti with you?

Seriously: no one wanted it. That's because while it looked normal from about the midpoint back, the front was so long and flat that it may have borrowed design cues from I-80 in Nebraska.

But this is the important thing about the 612 Scaglietti: once you got inside, you didn't have to look at it. You could forget about the fact that Silvio Berlusconi probably used the hood as a venue for some of the larger Bunga Bunga parties that wouldn't fit in his living room. You could just drive. And driving was what it did best.

Here's the truth: if you get past its styling, the 612 Scaglietti is one of the most underrated cars of the 2000s. In fact, on a list of "ugly things from the 2000s that weren't really so bad," the 612 Scaglietti would be firmly in second place, right behind Crocs. (For those who believe that Crocs *are* that bad, I must say that there is no better shoe for spending all day at the Six Flags Guess Your Age booth.)

Handling and steering are great, especially when you consider the 612 is the same size as an Acura RL. And the F1 transmission was among Ferrari's first that didn't feel like you were riding along with a seven-year-old who was learning to drive stick without any previous

exposure to a wheeled vehicle.

Also, body roll is so controlled that you feel like you're driving one of Ferrari's mid-engined sports cars. Of course, this notion goes away the moment you realize right on red is out of the question because the hood is so long you can't pull up far enough to see oncoming traffic. Still, the exhaust note is 430-rivaling, and while ride quality is awful, the 612 is no Bentley. You knew that the moment you laid eyes on it.

The 612's final strong point is its interior. In previous Ferrari models, interiors were created under the famous Italian principle of: *Can't we just bolt folding chairs to the floor?* This is proven by the fact that the 360's gauge cluster doesn't actually specify which turn signal is on.

But the 612's interior has leather, navigation, an LCD screen, and – this one must've been hard for Ferrari – a center console that didn't have an enormous gap under the stereo controls to reveal very cheap carpeting.

Unfortunately, you must eventually climb out of the car and return to reality, which is that you've just had the drive of your life in a vehicle that would lose a beauty contest to a Panamera. But if given the choice, I'd rather have the 612. One reason is that early models are hovering dangerously close to $100,000, which makes them cheaper than many Panameras. But most importantly, because it's a *Ferrari.* And that's the stuff of summer job dreams.

19. 1998 BMW M3 Sedan – Review

I've had a lot of cars. You know this because you've read this far, and when you got to that story about buying the Cadillac from the Korean kid, you thought: *Holy Mackerel! This guy's had a lot of cars!* And you're right. By my last count, the number is 22 different cars, all of which suffered at least one major malfunction that involved asking a friend if he could please give me a ride home from the mechanic just this one time.

Over the years, my cars have ranged from highly exciting to downright flammable. There was, for example, the Range Rover Classic that occasionally moved under its own power, the Porsche Panamera GTS that borrowed its dimensions from a supermarket, and the Volkswagen Jetta, which handled about as well as a longhorn steer. And yet, of all my cars, the one that I'm asked about most frequently is my 1998 BMW M3.

I have no idea why this is. My M3 was a white sedan with sagging rear suspension, 120,000 miles on the odometer, and a light gray interior that featured power windows, dual airbags, and the vague smell of urine. More than any other vehicle I've owned, it was just a used car. And yet people say things like: *"Oh, you've had six Porsches? That's swell. Tell me about your 15-year-old BMW with a ripped driver's seat bolster!"*

Of course, my usual reply to this is: *Did you just use the word "swell"?* But now that I've written this review, I can direct any further M3-

related questions here. Of course, the person asking these questions is probably an M3 fanboy, which means he'd rather wait for the movie.

History Lesson

Before we get started, a brief history. The M3 came to exist in the late '80s when BMW engineers looked at the standard 3-Series and thought: *Zis does not have enough rear spoilers.* So they gave it a rear spoiler, and also flared fenders, because flared fenders were all the rage in the late 1980s, sort of like trickle-down economics. BMW also gave the M3 a four-cylinder engine. This was probably monstrous in the 1980s, though it's now outdone by my iPhone in terms of both horsepower and overall size.

When it came time for the next M3, BMW decided to boost power and modernize. The result was a new M3 with 300 horsepower and not one single fender flare. The US model, however, had only 240 horsepower, presumably because *ze Americans cannot handle ze power.*

This philosophy eventually proved correct: every subsequent American M3 used the same engine as the European version, which has led to the M3's prominent starring role nearly all YouTube videos that begin with "Watch this!" and end with "Here's what it used to look like."

Anyway: on to mine.

Exterior

Let's not beat around the bush: the 1998 M3 sedan is absolutely gorgeous. And I say this with the utmost respect for things that are *somewhat* gorgeous, like Angelina Jolie, or Yellowstone.

The E36 M3 (that's what hardcore car enthusiasts call it after reading the term on Wikipedia) was attractive mainly because it was subtle. Today's M3 has a hood bulge and huge wheels and flared wheel arches and side skirts and fender grilles. Mine didn't have any of that crap.

Instead, you never really knew it was special until you got right up next to it. That's when I would floor the accelerator, resulting in a tremendously loud noise and a trip to the mechanic, where I would call a friend and ask if he could pick me up just this one time.

Interior

I loved the interior, largely because nothing felt like it was about to fall off. This is contrary to, say, a late-1990s Ford Taurus, where it feels like the turn signal stalk may drop to the floor at any second, bringing with it the entire steering column, the gauge cluster, and the headliner.

Probably the best part of mine was the light color, which BMW called "dove gray," though a more appropriate description may have been "off white with a vague smell of urine." Still: it nicely matched the white exterior, in a 1980s sort of way.

But there were a few unusual features. For instance: the center stack didn't have multiple air vents like a normal car, but rather one enormous vent inexplicably shaped like a huge triangle. Also odd were the rear seat belts, which came from the center rather than the door pillars. I considered this cool. My passengers thought I installed them myself.

But the low point was the steering wheel. For some reason, BMW chose to fit the E36 M3 with a steering wheel they may have borrowed from a large tractor-trailer truck. Seriously: the view forward from the driver's seat was roughly 40 percent windshield and 60 percent steering wheel. But I generally overlooked this flaw because the wheel had M-colored stitching.

Driving Experience

So the E36 M3 was commendable inside and out. Too bad it wasn't very good to drive.

I know, I know: I've just angered every single M3 owner in human history, who will now cut me off in traffic without using their turn signals. (In other words: life will be exactly like it is now.) But hear me out, because I'm going to make a case here using both logic and reason, which is highly unusual for me.

When the E36 M3 came out, many magazines hailed it as the "best-handling car in the world." Of course, car magazines would say that about *any* BMW, including a child's pedal car with the BMW logo on it.

But apparently the E36 M3 really was good to drive back then. The

problem is that, over the last 15 years, things have changed. For one, the E36 M3 has aged. That urine smell, for instance, was not there when it left the factory. Nor was the sagging rear suspension, described by the BMW forums as a problem with the "RTABs," an unknown acronym that resulted in a $600 bill from my mechanic. Put simply, no E36 M3 is as nice as it was when it rolled off the assembly line in the late '90s.

More importantly, other cars have gotten better. For example: while the E36 M3's 240 horsepower was probably adequate in the 1990s (or, if you were writing for a car magazine back then, "the single greatest amount of horsepower ever placed in an automobile"), it's outdone these days by the Toyota Camry.

In other words, the M3 is like a Beatles song: it was amazing when it came out, but now you're not quite sure how the world became obsessed with lyrics like "We all live in a yellow submarine, a yellow submarine, a yellow submarine," or the verse "And our friends are all on board / Many more of them live next door." (*How can they live next door to a submarine?* you might be wondering.)

For instance: consider the shifter. In a modern M3, this is a tight, stubby little affair that you can forcefully push around, thereby displaying your muscles to everyone in the car. In the E36, it's roughly the same size as a tree branch – and the throws are so long that every shift feels like you're trying to pass the gear lever to your backseat passengers.

There's also the acceleration. Again, this was probably considered sporty in the late 1990s. But today, you find yourself only keeping up with traffic – at least until it's time to shift. That's when you fall woefully behind and get honked at by someone who doesn't even know what a manual transmission is.

Basically, the M3's looks have stood the test of time, but – like all aging cars – its driving dynamics have been surpassed.

Conclusion

Despite the subpar driving experience, I highly recommend the E36 M3. There's a reason for that: everyone who asks me about the E36 M3 either a) wants one, or b) owns one, and they don't really want to hear me bash it. So instead, I'll offer this piece of advice: lower your expectations. This is not a modern M3, and it isn't even a sort-of-

modern M3. So try to avoid comparisons with the latest M3s by reading magazines or online reviews. Especially as you're waiting for a friend to pick you up from the mechanic.

20. The AMG Wagon and the Dragstrip

There's nothing like an evening spent drag racing. I'm an expert on this topic because I've spent many evenings doing things besides drag racing, like moving around my furniture to cover dusty spots so I don't have to vacuum. I've also spent many evenings drag racing, and those evenings are better, mainly because they end with my face smelling like gasoline.

As a car enthusiast, I believe that you, a fellow car enthusiast, should go drag racing. I already know you don't want to do this. You're probably thinking: *"Real races have curves!"* or possibly: *"Drag racing? Pah! My Miata with a roll cage could beat Schumacher's F1 car around Monaco! And I know what I'm talking about because I've participated in six autocrosses!"*

Drag racing, it seems, is sort of like the motorsports equivalent to paying with a check: everything else is better. The only possible exception is monster truck racing, which I believe is the motorsports equivalent to paying with coins.

But drag racing doesn't deserve this reputation. It's actually very exciting, even for the type of people who believe the Miata was created not by engineers, but rather by God himself so that we would no longer have to experience understeer.

To prove my point, I will now debunk a few baseless rumors that have given the sport a bad name over the years. I will do this using my

typical style: First, I will name the rumor. Then, I will use excessive hyperbole to distract you from the fact that the rumor is completely true. Let's get started.

Rumor: Drag racing is illegal. Yes, some drag racing is illegal. I am mostly referring to the kind of drag racing done late at night in Seattle industrial parks. You know the type: an RX-7 with a huge wing lines up next to a Supra with an enormous bodykit, and they race about 75 feet before one of them crashes into a pole. This results in all drag racers fleeing the area, though they're easy to track down because they have those annoying neon lights.

But I don't get involved in that sort of drag racing. I go to legal dragstrips, where races are started by "Christmas Tree" lights instead of teenage Asian girls wearing short skirts. Nearly all cities have legal dragstrips, including a few places in regulation-heavy California. Despite what you see in the movies, this does not include the L.A. River.

Rumor: Drag racers are a bunch of rednecks. Forget your cityfolk biases: drag racing is not just a group of rednecks who hang out and discuss the best place to find those decals that show Calvin peeing on the Ford logo. Each drag race also includes many well-educated individuals, such as the ambulance crews who wait around for the rednecks to crash.

Rumor: Drag racing is boring. This is the nastiest rumor of all. It may look like you're just going in a straight line, but drag racing is decidedly *not* boring. To prove it, I'm going to tell the story of the time I took my E63 AMG wagon to the dragstrip.

It all started in high school. Back then, I used to take my 1996 Volvo 850 Turbo to Bandimere Speedway near Denver, Colorado, which – at around 6,000 feet in elevation – is about the last place anyone should do any form of drag racing. At Bandimere, an Audi RS4 feels about as quick as one of those automatic vacuum cleaners that moves around on the floor and scares your cat.

I was always by myself at Bandimere. This happened for two reasons. One was that my male classmates would rather spend their time with girls than briefly drive their dad's Honda Pilot in a straight line. But it was also because nobody at the dragstrip really wanted to talk to the guy with the Volvo.

So I would sit in the car and listen to Jimmy Eat World as I waited for my turn, which always took forever because the rednecks kept crashing and the paramedics kept taking them away. When I finally reached the starting line, I'd mash the brake and throttle simultaneously, filled with anticipation, waiting for the lights, any second now, and suddenly they'd turn GREEN! and I'd take off with roughly the same velocity as a moving walkway.

Really, it was very anticlimactic, especially when I was still exploring the limits of first gear as the other car was deploying its parachute.

For a while, I stopped drag racing. That's because I went to college, where I had a dark red Audi A4 that couldn't make it down a dragstrip without a costly electrical malfunction. But I couldn't stay away forever. Us hardcore drag racers never can. We just hear the 'strip calling to us. Just ask noted drag racer Chip Foose, who – after years of drag racing – definitely still hears the strip calling, but these days it has to speak up a bit.

Anyway: I eventually returned to the dragstrip four years after I left. This time, three things were a little different:

1. The place. By then, I had moved to Georgia. That meant the dragstrip was no longer surrounded by mountains that reeked of pot, but rather rural countryside where the rebel flag is like a Wal-Mart parking permit.

Atlanta's local dragstrip is called Atlanta Dragway. But don't let the name fool you: it's nowhere near Atlanta. Instead, it's an hour and a half north in rural Commerce, Georgia, presumably named for its impressive aggregation of both a Wal-Mart and a Home Depot.

2. The car. I have absolutely no idea what happened to my Volvo. My parents called me one day and claimed they sold it, but that's probably like when you tell your kids the dog went to a farm where it will play with other dogs forever and ever. By now I'm sure it's been scrapped, if not by the people who bought it, then by the state of Colorado for rampant environmental violations.

So we would be driving my E63 AMG wagon, a car which needs no introduction, unless of course you're at a dragstrip in the kind of place where people see a Ferrari and say: *"Man, for that kinda money, he coulda bawt three duallys instead!"*

3. Companions. No, I still couldn't convince a woman to accompany me. Instead, I was joined by my friends Sam and Andrew, whose sole qualification for dragstrip duty was that they had, at various points in their driving careers, obeyed traffic lights.

We drove to the dragstrip on a Friday night. In Denver, amateur drag racing was done on Wednesdays, presumably so participants could spend Fridays pursuing some form of entertainment that wouldn't leave them partially deaf. But in Commerce, we *were* the entertainment. This was illustrated by the large crowd, which consisted of beer-drinking locals gathered to watch *other* beer-drinking locals pilot their daily drivers down the strip. Tonight, they would get an extra treat: a Mercedes station wagon driven by three cityfolk who coulda bawt a dually instead.

We arrived around 7 p.m. and paid our $20 entry fee. Before we could race, we had to submit to a tech inspection, which was performed by a local mechanic in NHRA overalls. The inspection consisted of the mechanic a) opening the E63's hood, and b) remarking on the size of its plastic engine over. He also searched for the battery, but was unable to find it. As a result, he judged the car to be mechanically sound.

We pulled up to the staging area and discovered the interesting assortment of vehicles owned by our fellow drag racers. Some highlights:

1. At least half of the cars in attendance were modified Mustangs and Camaros. The most popular modification, in case you're wondering, involved junkyard body panel swaps. Oddly, most of these cars had valid license plates, proving that "street legal" means something a little different in North Georgia.

2. There was an SRT-4 that was approximately as loud as a space shuttle launch. This is a mandatory component of dragstrip amateur nights. In fact, the NHRA could shut you down if there isn't a loud SRT-4 in the vicinity, unless you can prove your venue contains at least one dubiously modified Eagle Talon.

3. Around 20 percent of the entrants were driving pickup trucks, including a few huge diesels with actual smoke stacks. They made so much smoke it looked like someone put wheels on Depression-era Cleveland.

4. The highlight was a Nissan Titan that looked stock except for tiny rear tires that may have come from one of those electric shopping carts they give the elderly at grocery stores.

We piled into the wagon with me behind the wheel for the first run. In the other lane was a red Mustang with a gray front fender. I stopped. The Mustang stopped. I waited for the light, energized by the fact that I would soon be driving a Mercedes station wagon on the same dragstrip where Top Fuel dragsters compete to see who can make it furthest without blowing up.

And then, after a few seconds … GREEN! We were off, *way* ahead of the Mustang, so far ahead that his next dragstrip conversation may be about where to find Calvin peeing on the Mercedes logo.

It must've been a sight to see, but were too consumed with laughter to notice. Here we were, moving quickly down a dragstrip in a three-row station wagon that was savagely beating a modified Mustang. We were also quite comfortable, what with the ventilated seats.

We ended the run several yards ahead of the Mustang. I pulled off the track and drove to the time booth to pick up our time slip. It was there we were informed in no uncertain terms that we had committed about eleven sins of drag racing.

One was too many people in the car. It turns out a car as fast as the E63 couldn't run with passengers. That was a downer, as I had planned to sit in back and wave to drag-tuned Camaros from the rear-facing third row.

We also committed a helmet violation. It turns out that 13.999 seconds or below requires a helmet. Apparently, an accident without one meant instant death, while a driver who wrecks at 14 or above will walk away with only cuts and scrapes on his soft, helmetless head. This was undoubtedly was established after years of scientific testing from the drag racing people.

So I donned a helmet for the next run and ditched Andrew and Sam. Once again, I arrived at the line, hit the brake and gas, and released the brake when the light turned green. After an initial struggle with traction, the E63 launched with all its might. My time slip said 13.6, now delivered with a warning against spinning my tires at the starting line. Tough crowd.

When I returned to the prep area, Andrew and Sam told me about the announcer. In Denver, the dragstrip was quiet, since no one in their right mind would want to spend an evening doing a play-by-play for an amateur drag racing event. But since this was the happenin' place to be on a Friday night in rural Georgia, the Atlanta Dragway employed an excitable commentator with a southern accent that rivaled Matthew McConaughey's in *A Time to Kill*. Apparently, he had some choice commentary about the wagon that included lines like *"mom's home"* and *"look at them roof rails!"*

To shut him up, I decided we had to run a "twelve," which is what racers call a quarter-mile time in the twelve-second range. If you "run twelves," you're anywhere from 12.00 seconds to 12.99 seconds. Dragstrip precision is shocking.

But it wouldn't be easy. Sam made the next run. He had a strong launch and moved quickly down the strip, only to inexplicably put on his brakes about 100 yards before the finish line. The announcer had a field day: *"Looks like mom doesn't want to get a speeding ticket!"*

When Sam got back, I asked what the hell he was thinking. He replied simply: *"I thought it was over."*

When it was Andrew's turn, Sam took me into the crowd, where he made some friends during my earlier solo run. He introduced me to John and Bob, who were standing in the front row drinking beer out of a soft-sided cooler. Sam introduced me as "the station wagon owner," which began a barrage of questions I will now translate for you:

JOHN: *Dat engine gotta blower?* ("Is it supercharged?")

BOB: *Wut yurz it?* ("What year is it?")

JOHN: *Wuts it makin' at the whuls?"* ("How much power?")

The questions culminated with the obvious *"Wuddit run yuh?"* (or, for you Yankees: "What did it cost?"), which is a question I normally shy away from. But I was hardly going to pull out "that's none of your business" to a rural southerner who was probably carrying a rifle, or at least the Bible.

I answered truthfully – "about $40,000" – which was met with pure disappointment. It seems that in the rural South, people think all

Mercedes products cost $100,000 and never lose value. So I quickly followed with "but it was $94,000 new!" This earned me a smile, a head bob, and an offer of true southern good ol' boy respect: a canned Coors Light. You could tell they were mentally calculating how many duallys I could've had.

Then a voice came from the other side of John and Bob.

"Camaro?" yelled a man wearing sunglasses even though it had been dark for three hours.

"Yup," said Bob. "*zee twunny eight*."

Bob and John saw my confused look.

"*Doug*," they said, *"dissus Blind Jackson."*

Blind Jackson, it turned out, is an institution at the dragstrip. He is also, as his title suggests, totally blind. He comes every week with John and Bob, who supplement the announcer's play-by-play commentary with their own. Upon hearing an engine note, for example, Blind Jackson throws out a guess: *"Camaro?"* and John or Bob reply with a few more details. At the end of a run, Blind Jackson says *"Thirteen?"* and John or Bob confirm: *"Yep, thirteen three."* Then they all take a swig of beer.

Bizarrely, Blind Jackson gave me several useful tips on how to get the best possible launch, though I didn't ask how he came by the knowledge. He also handed me a business card, which listed his full name as "Blind Jackson" and his occupation as – truly – "Professional Car Detailer."

We had time for all of the introductions because Andrew was busy showing his novice skills on the starting line. He went past the staging lights and didn't realize he needed to back up to trip the Christmas Tree. So he sat there, uncertain why the lights weren't activating.

Andrew couldn't hear the audience's cries of "back up!" for two reasons. One was the tight-fitting helmet I had borrowed from a co-worker whose head, we discovered, was about the size of a fig. The other was our brilliant strategy that rolling up the windows would have a profound effect on aerodynamics.

So the audience yelled and Andrew sat there, oblivious to their cries, until finally the track staff made hand motions that Andrew needed to back up. By then, even Blind Jackson was yelling. With both cars finally lined up, the lights turned green and Andrew was off. He managed a 13.5.

Eager for another shot at a twelve, I waited for Andrew to return to the staging area. And waited, and waited, and waited. When he finally arrived, he sheepishly announced that track staff stopped him for speeding on his way back. That's right: he had been pulled over for speeding *at a race track. Really* tough crowd.

Cars dropped out as the night wore on, presumably because body panels were falling off. That left the three of us with the track to ourselves, and we took full advantage. Sam ran a 13.4. The announcer remarked: *"Time for soccer practice."* Then I ran a 13.3. *"Load up the car, we're going to the zoo!"* Then Andrew ran a 13.2. *"I wonder how many strollers that thing can fit!"*

Each of us was stunned at the variation in times considering we were driving a car with an automatic transmission in a perfectly straight line. It turned out, we soon realized, there was more strategy to this than we thought.

On about my sixth run, I gave it everything I had, which involved mashing the gas pedal just as hard as every other time and pointing the wheel just as straight as every other time, but with a little more mental determination. This seemed to work: the car ran a 13.160 at 108 miles per hour.

But it was the best time of the night, despite several more attempts with all the determination we could muster.

Leaving the dragstrip, we agreed there was no better way to spend $20. Each of us made six or seven passes and cleared 100 miles per hour – legally – every time. And while we were disappointed the car didn't hit the twelves, I was certain it could be done – if only to shut up the announcer. We would just need a few more pointers from Blind Jackson.

21. 2001 Mercedes-Benz E55 AMG – Review

When most people think back on all the cars they've owned, they remember the great times. The memories. The front seat conceptions. The back seat childbirths. The occasional vomiting incident. (Apparently the car I'm thinking of is an ambulance driven by horny EMTs.)

Not me. When I think about my past cars, I primarily remember the problems they had and the money I spent. For example: say "G-wagen" and I recall a rusted-out exhaust. Mention "Lotus Elise" and I'm reminded of sitting in my own sweat as I crossed Kansas. "Jetta" gets me silently weeping.

But there's one exception to this: my 2001 Mercedes E55 AMG.

I loved my E55, largely because it was my first Mercedes. I owned several other luxury brands before it. There was an Audi that had transmission problems; a BMW that had suspension problems; and a Volvo, which had every single problem that an automobile is capable of having, and some that I thought were confined to military spacecraft. (For example: I once replaced something called a "solenoid," which sounds suspiciously like a robotic device that explores the sun.)

But deep down, I've always loved Mercedes. Don't worry, I already know what you're thinking: *Aren't you a little young for that?* There's no doubt the answer is yes. That's because I'm in my 20s, and the

average Mercedes driver is however old you have to be to think it's acceptable to buy a vehicle in metallic gold.

That didn't matter to me. I had just sold my BMW M3 when I got the E55, and I thought it would be *so cool* to have an AMG Mercedes. So, I did what any young person would do: I bought the first one that became available.

Fortunately, that turned out to be a low-mile, one-owner E55 without a scratch or dent anywhere on the body. I've decided to review it here to give you some insight into the life of the only guy in his 20s who gets excited about large, comfortable sedans.

Let's start with the E55 basics. Surely, you know of the AMG E-Class. You know, for example, that it's either supercharged, or turbocharged, or just really fast. Well, the 2001 model was none of those.

You see, before Mercedes made a supercharged E-Class AMG, or a turbocharged E-Class AMG, or a really fast E-Class AMG, they made this thing. It had 349 horsepower and wheels with incredibly large silver surfaces.

There's no good excuse for the wheels. In the years since 2001, they've turned what should be a typical late-'90s used car into something that looks like it was manufactured in 1956. This is roughly when the average E-Class buyer was walking to middle school – uphill both ways – while thinking: *boy, a gold car sure would be swell!*

But at least the wheels were impressive in their own large, silvery way. That wasn't true of the powertrain. You're probably thinking that 349 horsepower doesn't sound so bad, but you're missing two key points. First: this E-Class is heavy. I don't have exact numbers, but I believe it weighed approximately as much as one of those huge sea creatures that textbooks superimpose next to a drawing of a human so you can understand just how large it is.

The second problem is the transmission. Since it's in a Mercedes, the E55's automatic wasn't really tuned for performance. Instead, the goal was to get old people from Berlin to Munich as smoothly as possible while they thought: *"This is a wonderful car. If only it was gold."* The transmission was dull, smooth, and tremendously unwelcome to change. In other words: it was everything you might look for in a Republican presidential candidate.

Handling was similarly unexciting. Steering was direct, but the AMG modifications appeared to consist solely of a large engine, even larger wheels, and many subtle AMG emblems. It was as if they had completely forgotten to update the suspension. Looking back, I seem to recall the car's most aggressive feature was body roll.

Now you're thinking: *OK, so it drove like crap. Then why did you like it so much?*

One reason is that I *expected it* to drive like crap. Expectations, you see, are the key to any used car purchase. For example, when I bought my Lotus, I thought: *A drive across the country! That sounds like a great way to pass the time!* But in about Arizona, I realized: *A drive across the country! This is the single worst mistake of my life!* As a result, I hated the Lotus, but not as much as the guy who sold it to me in the middle of July without informing me the air conditioning was broken.

My expectation with the Mercedes was that I'd be getting a big sedan with tons of body roll. And guess what? I got a big Mercedes with tons of body roll. How satisfying.

Another good thing about the E55 was that it turned out to be very reliable. Although I only had it for a few months, any amount of time with a used German car is a Bear Sterns-style financial gamble. But the E55's only fault during my tenure was a failed power window motor, which is the used German car equivalent to an oil change.

Design was also a highlight. Wheels aside, the exterior was fairly nice. That's largely because my E55 was painted silver, which is the color that all Mercedes products should be painted, except possibly for the R-Class, which just shouldn't exist.

The interior was the final strong point. No, not the interior in mine, which ranked right up there with "DMV waiting room" on a list of the single most boring places to spend time. I mean what the interior *could've been*. That's because, possibly to make up for the lack of suspension tuning, Mercedes offered the seat centers in virtually every color that was part of the Crayola lineup. Seriously: seat center options included red, purple, and some sort of brown color that looked like peanut butter. I wouldn't believe this myself if I hadn't seen each of these colors in tiny photos on Craigslist.

Unfortunately, mine had the boring, normal-colored seat centers,

which were the same shade as the actual seat. The good news: the car only had 65,000 miles on it, which meant those boring, normal-colored seat centers had very little wear.

Although I loved the E55, I sold it under the tried-and-true car enthusiast theory of: *I found something else to pour money into.* Not surprisingly, the buyer was an older man who is probably cruising around this very second while thinking: *Damn, this transmission is smooth!* Presumably, he's already painted it gold.

22. The Land Cruiser and the Public Auto Auction

Let's talk about car auctions. Undoubtedly, you've heard of them. But you're a little wary of visiting one, largely because you're afraid that you will reach up to scratch your ear at the very moment they're about to drop the gavel on an old milk truck, and the auctioneer will take this as a sign that you want to *buy* the milk truck, and then you'll have to start delivering milk.

I know what you're thinking: *Doug, once again you've addressed my exact concerns. That's precisely why I don't visit auctions!* This doesn't surprise me, since I was the same way for a long time (fearful of delivering milk). But then I found the Craigslist ad.

If you're a normal person, you probably think of Craigslist as more of an amusement than an actual place where business is conducted, unless that business is finding a) escorts, or b) used patio furniture. But it's highly addictive for us car enthusiasts, mostly because every single car we wanted in our childhood is currently for sale on Craigslist, half-finished and waiting for us to scoop it up and nurse it back to life at considerable expense. So when I saw a Craigslist ad for a public auto auction with the "FIRST 10 VEHICELS STARTING AT 100 $," I couldn't resist checking it out.

Before we go any further, I should note in very strict terms that this is not an eBay auction. That's because eBay is for sissies, also known as overly cautious idiots who want to *speak* to the person who's selling them goods. Instead, I'm referring to an *actual* car auction, located in the part of Atlanta where local high schools play baseball games against local juvenile detention facilities.

I arrived at the auction on a Saturday morning. Before I could explore, I had to pay an entry fee. This took place in a temporary warehouse-style building that contained a Maserati Quattroporte, a sweet old lady file clerk, and an armed sheriff's deputy.

After paying, I started to walk the lot. These were the first three cars I saw:

1. An Audi TT Roadster that looked kind of nice on the outside and kind of nice on the inside. Its only flaw was a gear lever that was apparently disconnected from the vehicle itself and flopping around like a beanie baby.

2. A 2006 BMW 545i with every possible warning light illuminated including some that I didn't even know existed, such as "visit dealership immediately" and "for God's sake don't buy that TT."

3. A Lincoln Navigator that was dangerously listing to one side as if it was doing a *Costa Concordia* impression, likely due to the complete malfunction of its air suspension.

There were also many cheap economy cars that looked as though they'd been refinished by a team of traveling house painters using only Wite-Out. In other words: it was exactly what I expected from a car auction whose marketing efforts consisted entirely of Craigslist ads.

The good news was that most of the vehicles ran properly. You could tell this because the auction had a generous test-drive policy that allowed you to start each car, drive it forward about eight feet, then reverse it back into its parking space. You were not allowed to, say, turn the steering wheel, but this didn't seem to bother most potential buyers.

Speaking of the buyers, this was an interesting crew. It was mainly three types of people. Number one: down-on-their-luck Atlantans just looking for cheap transportation. Number two: used car dealers who seemed to believe that, on this day, in this place, they were King. (This was proven when one of them showed up in a Maybach with dealer plates and got out wearing a fur coat.) The third type of buyer was me, undoubtedly the only person present for recreational purposes.

Eventually, the staff gathered everyone inside to go over the auction rules. They were explained by the auctioneer, an enormous southern man in his late 30s who looked like he might, at any moment, chomp down on the microphone, then finish it off with a slice of the gavel. (At one point, late in the auction, he took a break from bid calling to announce: *"C'n someone go faahnd me some M&Ms?"*)

His explanation of the rules started with things like "*If yuh win a car, yuh have to buy it*" and "*Yuh pay fur deh car before yuh go draahv it.*" But he really got the crowd roaring when he covered vehicle selection.

He opened with: "*If yuh dun know hah to drive a stick shift*," after which he slammed the microphone on the table and crossed his arms. The crowd burst into riotous laughter and started clapping. Apparently, this was his signature bit. A few seconds later, he finished: "If yuh don know hah to drive a stick shift … then *dun bid on a stick shift!"* By now, even the Maybach pimp was laughing.

With the rules over, we started the auction. The first lot was one of the "VEHICELS STARTING AT 100 $," which turned out to be a late-1990s Pontiac Grand Prix painted black except for a large pink stripe down the middle. It was riding on two temporary tires and had a hole in the exhaust, which the auctioneer announced was actually a feature: *E'ryone will hear yuh comin'!*

Although bidding got up to $800, the auctioneer didn't sell the car. The same thing happened to the next car, and the next car, until all ten VEHICELS STARTING AT 100 $ went past, *and not one of them actually sold.*

It turns out they each had a reserve price, which I later realized had been instituted entirely so they could keep advertising, week in and week out, that the first ten cars would start at $100. This was probably the auctioneer's most clever life decision, not counting all those times he accepted "if you can eat the whole thing, it's free" challenges.

After the ten cheapo cars were gone, the "good stuff" started coming out. One of the first decent lots was the TT, which didn't garner a single bid despite being pushed across the block in a highly competent fashion. This meant it would be back next week, and the week after that, and the week after that, until finally the auctioneer ate it for lunch.

There were some acceptable vehicles, like the occasional late-model Japanese economy car. And there was occasionally an Escalade with rims, which drew cheers from the crowd but little actual bidding once it hit three grand. But my hand didn't go up until the Land Cruiser came out.

The 1995 Land Cruiser was announced as having 237,000 miles, which is approximately the distance to the moon, or, if you're a Land Cruiser owner, ten summers of driving to your weekend house on the Cape. It had a rusty brush guard, a missing rear wheel arch, and an engine that made a ticking noise as if it would explode if taken over 3,000 rpm. The bidding started at $2,000, which is probably the Land Cruiser's value in parts. No one raised a hand.

I assumed there was a lack of interest because the crowd's SUV knowledge included Escalades and maybe a Buick Rendezvous owned by someone's grandmother. No one there was exactly a yachting country clubber, and that's what it takes to truly appreciate an old Land Cruiser. But I knew I could flip this thing for a profit if I bought it for $2,000. So I started the bidding.

But with no other bidders, the auction ended because the car didn't meet reserve. As the auctioneer moved on to the next car, he stopped the bidding to call me over to his podium.

"Cain't sell it fur two, but wut about twunny-two?" he asked. *"Thing's wurth that in parts!"*

Under his middle-Georgia deer-shootin' scruff, he had a point. So I nodded. The Land Cruiser was mine.

I returned to the warehouse to sign the paperwork, which was a surprisingly easy process that didn't involve the sheriff's deputy at all. When it came time for payment, I put the entire thing on my credit card. The sweet old lady file clerk treated this like a regular occurrence.

Next, I had a choice to make. I could get a "regular" temporary license plate, which was really a piece of construction paper with an arbitrary date written on it. Or I could get an *actual* temporary license plate, which cost an extra ten dollars. That's right: this place was so shady they were *charging extra* for a temporary license plate.

I paid my ten dollars and went out to the Land Cruiser.

Yes, the mileage was high, and the seats were ripped, and one of the back doors didn't open, and the rear hatch didn't *close*. And, OK, so the ticking sound was even louder in the cabin than outside the car. And maybe the third row was flopping around unrestrained in the cargo area. But the engine worked. The transmission worked. The low-range gearing worked. And the lights, the turn signals and the power locks all operated perfectly.

I was satisfied. As I drove home in my $2,000 Land Cruiser, I turned on the radio. The sound quality was perfect and the automatic antenna shot up like an arrow. I had survived my first auction experience. And I didn't even end up delivering milk.

23. Sports Cars Don't Really Attract Women

I once owned a Lotus Elise. Of course, being six-foot-three, I didn't really own it so much as I regularly attempted to drive it by assuming the approximate size and shape of a football.

Seriously: the Elise is small. So small, in fact, that it was easier to view traffic lights by looking *over* the windshield frame than through the windshield itself. I later realized this meant that, in the event of a rollover, my head would've acted as the roll bar. Given the Elise's curb weight, it may have actually been useful.

Of course, none of this surprises you, because car enthusiasts constantly make sacrifices for sports cars. Ferrari F355 owners, for example, sacrifice a significant portion of their net worth every three years to pay for an engine-out service that can only be performed by a man named Giuseppe who charges the same hourly rate as OJ Simpson's defense team. Audi TT owners, meanwhile, sacrifice a huge portion of their manhood every time they open the door.

Just kidding, of course. The Audi TT has found a following among a wide variety of drivers, all of whom will trade it in several weeks before the warranty expires.

Anyway: there are a variety of reasons why car enthusiasts make sacrifices for sports cars. One is the pure joy of heading out in the evening for a long, spirited drive on your favorite twisty road with the wind in your hair, or – if you have a Lotus – the wind on your forehead. Another, of course, is to attract women. But I'm here to tell you this is a huge fallacy.

When I had my Lotus, men would approach me at gas pumps, gaze longingly at the car, and ask at least one of the following three questions:

1. How fast does it go?
2. How much does it cost?
3. How many chicks do you get?

I hated these questions. That's because people were *always* disappointed by the answers, which, in case you're wondering, are:

1. About as fast as an Accord V6.

2. About as much as an Accord V6.
3. About as many as an Accord V6.

Admittedly, these weren't the only comments I got. Sometimes, men would drive up in a stanced 240SX and scream "Nice Celica!" before driving away with an exhaust note apparently tuned to mimic a medium-sized coffee grinder.

But it was usually one of those three questions, and they usually resulted in disappointment. Of course, I know what you're thinking: *What do you mean it didn't get any women? Are you a complete idiot? Also, my Audi TT gets tons more women than your overpriced Celica!*

It's one of life's universal truths: men think sports cars get women. That's because most men think that a woman's brain is generally rational, if a bit preoccupied with footwear, until an exotic car drives by, at which point she must chase it down and remove her underwear. But the simple truth is that most women just don't care. Really. When the majority of women see a Lotus on the street, their first thought is: *Hmm. I wonder if I have any text messages.*

Of course, this isn't true of *all* women. When I posted photos of the Lotus on my Facebook (this is a requirement designed to show your high school friends how cool you've become), more than a few women from high school contacted me to "catch up." This brings me to another important point: the women attracted by a *car* probably aren't the ones you want to attract in the first place.

Interestingly, while the Lotus didn't go very far with women, it *did* draw the attention of a lot of men. I don't recall a single fuel stop or traffic light where I wasn't approached by at least one male car enthusiast whose neighbor had a Lotus, or whose dad had a Corvette, or whose friend had a Ferrari, or whose uncle knew Colin Chapman, or whose dad raced with Colin Chapman, or whose great-grandfather was Colin Chapman's gay lover.

Beyond gas stations, every drive yielded constant thumbs-ups, smiles and camera phone pictures. One guy even leaned out of his ancient Ford Ranger and yelled *"At least mine's paid for!"* as he sped away at a stoplight. He had forgotten to ask question number two.

There's a moral to this story. Straight men: a sports car won't get you laid. But to all the ladies and gay men out there: if you want to improve your game, buy a Lotus. And possibly a helmet.

24. 2001 Porsche 911 Turbo – Review

Ladies and gentlemen, you're in for a treat. That's because I'm going to start this story by listing the three most pretentious phrases in modern society.

Let's start with third place. That would be when your Facebook friends post pictures in front of a Ritz-Carlton with the caption: *No big deal, just chillin' at the Ritz*. In second place, you have the famed sentence opener: *"I don't know how they do it in coach, but in business class…"* which is commonly overheard at all the finest restaurants in Aspen. And the single most pretentious phrase you can possibly utter? *"I've had six Porsches."*

I know this because I've actually *had* six Porsches, and boy do I feel like an asshole. I'm usually so embarrassed when I hear myself say "I've had six Porsches" that I immediately follow it up with something self-deprecating, such as: *"But Notting Hill is my favorite movie!"* But this only makes people think I'm pretentious *and* I have poor taste in movies.

I eventually explain that five of the Porsches were lease deals from my employer, Porsche Cars North America. Only once did I ever man up and actually purchase a Porsche on my own dime. And that's the one I've decided to review, because I'm probably under some type of non-disclosure agreement on the others.

The one I owned was a 2001 911 Turbo, which is known by

enthusiasts as “the 996,” or possibly “the ugly one,” due to the shape of its headlights. I personally love the headlights, mostly because they destroyed the car’s resale value, which allowed me to pick one up for a song. And by “a song,” I mean around $35,000, which is quite an expensive song, but still not *that* expensive. Maybe something by Ke $ha.

Still, it’s cheap in the Porsche world. The 996 Turbo’s predecessor, inexplicably called the 993 Turbo, sells for double the money despite being older and slower. I love the 993, but I sometimes think buying one would be like paying $1,000 for an iPod Classic because you’re feeling nostalgic. So I chose the 996, ugly headlights and all. And now I’m reviewing it, because I’m just a writer, typing things on a computer, asking you to read them. (If you understood this reference, you’ll know I was serious about my poor taste in movies.)

Outside

When I started looking for a 996 Turbo, my only requirement was that I didn’t want black. There’s a reason for this: the 996 Turbo has black accents that set it apart from the regular 996, and you can’t see them if the whole car is black. This is important because you don’t want people thinking you have a regular 996, which is the store-brand soda of the Porsche world.

The result of this adamant stipulation was that I ended up with black. That’s the kind of thing that happens when your search method involves a) visiting AutoTrader.com, and b) buying the cheapest car available.

Fortunately, even the cheapest car was gorgeous. This is mainly because of the “Turbo Twist” wheels, which gave the 996 an exotic look that disguised the fact that it cost only a little more than a Nissan Altima.

But it’s not just the wheels. The shape plays a role, too. The 996 is low, sleek, and wide. To me (and really no one else), it’s far more attractive than later 911 models. That’s because I think the new stuff looks less like a sports car and more like the kind of luxury convertible old men bring to upscale shopping areas in order to hit on slightly less old women.

I also liked the 996’s rear “hips” and the front air dam, both of which help take your mind off the headlights. Speaking of headlights, I

eventually endeared to them, which is what happens when men buy things: after a while, the flaws become strengths. This is the exact opposite of marriage.

Inside

The interior isn't so charming. The 996 was Porsche's first real attempt at a luxury car, and it's well documented that first attempts don't usually go as planned. Witness, for example, Rob Lowe's first attempt at amateur videography.

Many of the interior issues come from the materials. For some reason, the 996's interior plastics obviously came from a request for proposal that stated plainly: *We seek to find the cheapest source of plastic in the natural world.* General Motors probably called for years asking about the supplier, sort of like you might call your mother-in-law to get a good recipe. And from the looks of today's Impala, it's pretty clear Porsche gave them the name.

Material quality wasn't the only problem. One of my biggest complaints was the gauge lighting. All 996 gauges are backlit in a faint orange, which makes them look like one of those late-1990s Casio watches that even CVS wouldn't bother to keep in a locked case.

But the real low point was the car's navigation system. Yes: there was a navigation system. It cost $3,000 extra in 2001 despite clearly being created from a book of MapQuest maps that had been stapled together. There were a few problems with this system, namely:

1. No matter how far you travelled, or how fast, it only refreshed approximately every eight seconds.

2. Street names were displayed at random, and at the sole discretion of the navigation system.

3. It said I was driving in the ocean almost the entire time I owned the car.

Seriously: every few months I would go to the dealer and ask them to re-calibrate the navigation system, which they did. But the further I drove from the dealer, the less accurate the system was, until I ended up back in the ocean, or – on occasion – in the Gulf of Mexico.

On the Road

Once you got over the low-rent interior, and the color, and the navigation system, and the headlights, and you actually turned on the car and put it in gear, you were in for a good time. Unless, of course, you pushed your foot to the floor. Then you were in for a change of underwear.

When it was new, the 996 Turbo's numbers were: 420 horsepower, six-speed manual, four-wheel drive, 0-to-60 in four-point-something. But those figures don't tell you how the car delivered its power. To better understand that, imagine a child throwing a temper tantrum. One minute he's calm, and the next minute he's throwing his food everywhere and screaming as loudly as he possibly can. *That* is how this car delivered power.

Here's what happens: You're cruising along in second gear at 1,100 rpm. You floor it. *Absolutely nothing occurs for an entire second*. Then, with a jolt known only to drug runners who use those really cool-looking speedboats but still always get caught by the Coast Guard, you're snapped forward at almost uncontrollable speeds. I loved it.

I also loved the old-school handling. The steering is heavy, meaning you feel everything. This is contrary to my dad's Lexus RX330, which would steer exactly the same whether you're driving down a paved road or sitting in a giant tub of mayonnaise.

Also: the 996 Turbo's shift action is tight, which is welcome for a car that was designed in the late '90s. This is different from my 1998 BMW M3, reviewed elsewhere in this book, whose throws were so long that shifting gears felt quite similar to raking leaves.

Maybe the only flaw is the car's tendency to understeer. This isn't the most enjoyable sensation when you're dealing with a vehicle whose turbocharger could, at any second, send you crashing into the third-world country that made all the interior plastics.

Verdict

Before you purchase a 911 Turbo, *for God's sake get a pre-purchase inspection*. I got one from a lazy mechanic who missed the fact that the car needed a new clutch. *A new clutch.* That's about one step away from missing the fact that the car needs a new *engine*, which even I could deduce, possibly from the online photos.

I flew several hours to pick up the car and noticed the clutch issue on the drive home. Fortunately, the lazy mechanic was employed by a great dealership, which shipped the car back and installed a new clutch completely free of charge. If you're curious, the out-of-pocket cost for a clutch repair in a 996 Turbo? Just over five grand. They have to take out the engine.

And so I repeat: get a pre-purchase inspection. And if it passes the pre-purchase inspection, buy the car. Yes, the styling may split opinions, and the interior isn't exactly modern. But you buy this car to drive. And you won't regret any second of that, unless the spooling turbo *actually sends you into the ocean*. If it does, you can get another one and start telling people "I've had two Porsches." It's not six, but it's a start.

25. The Old Range Rover

Part 1: They Can't All Be That Bad

We've all heard a horror story about an old British car. You can't even *be* a car enthusiast without knowing a guy who had his MG catch fire in rush hour, or his Triumph stall on the way to his wedding, or his Jaguar XJS V12 move under its own power on one glorious occasion during the Clinton administration before it collapsed into a pile of rust, cracked leather, and Lucas wiring (the Jaguar, not the Clinton administration).

And why are there so many British car horror stories? Because we, and by this I mean all of us car enthusiasts, keep buying them. We spot a clean-looking 1980s Jaguar on Craigslist and think: *they can't ALL be that bad*. A couple grand later and it's in the garage, along with an oil stain.

I recently had my own *they can't all be that bad* British car moment. After owning a Toyota Land Cruiser and a Mercedes G-Wagen, I decided it was time to sample some other country's most obnoxious large SUV, which meant either an Escalade or a Range Rover. And since I wasn't about to spring for a set of chrome spinners, it would have to be a Range Rover.

But I didn't want any electronic crap: I wanted a Range Rover Classic.

You know, the same one the Queen learned to drive on. In the 1970s. When she was 65.

Of course, no one *actually* wants a 1970s Range Rover. They have the insulation of a cardboard box, they're built from compressed rust, and turning on the headlights is like holding your iPhone out the window.

So I expanded my search to newer Classics, which also had those problems but threw in some modern creature comforts, like seat belts. The pinnacle was 1995, the Classic's final year, when it adopted major technological advancements like airbags, a tilt steering wheel, and – this is a big one – backlit center console switches. Clearly, Land Rover was poised to be a major player in the luxury vehicle world.

I found a 1995 model about six hours away in Raleigh, North Carolina that checked all the right boxes: it was a handsome long-wheelbase model. It was green, as all old British cars should be. And, according to the online photos, it wasn't currently on fire. Best of all, some forward-thinking previous owner had converted the suspension to coil springs. This eliminated the factory air suspension, whose airbags had the same durability as brightly colored party balloons.

The seller also claimed the Range Rover had no rust. This was questionable, since they added rust in the factory, somewhere between pounding the body panels to make them fit and thoroughly examining the engine to ensure it did, in fact, have eight cylinders. I asked the seller to put the Rover on a lift and send photos of the undercarriage. He replied: "No, it's stock suspension. Not a lift."

Things were going well.

The seller eventually snapped some rust-free photos, which were probably of a neighbor's Toyota. But he earned my trust by providing records of a comprehensive restoration completed when he bought the Range Rover. The fact that he was selling it just a year later should've given me some insight into the "*they can't all be that bad"* world of British car ownership, but – using my usual car-buying strategy – I wasn't thinking about silly things like ownership costs. It was more like: *How soon can I have it in my driveway?*

So we agreed on price and exchanged the money for the title. I was now the proud owner of a Range Rover Classic. I just had to get it home.

Of course, I couldn't drive it. Even I knew that spending six hours in a 20-year-old Land Rover was a bad idea that would end with me stranded in rural South Carolina, where the solution to every car problem is either *"It needs a jump-start"* or *"It needs a Hemi."*

So I arranged for shipping through a colleague at Porsche. Three days later, the Range Rover arrived on the back of a tractor-trailer filled with brand-new Passats wrapped in original plastic after leaving Volkswagen's plant in Chattanooga. If there was ever a month where VW missed its sales target by one unit, this is why.

That first night in my new old Range Rover was heaven. The driving position was pure 1970s Prince Charles foxhunting trip. The acceleration also reminded me of the 1970s, though in a less rosy way. Two front-mounted auxiliary headlights about the size of basketballs provided adequate lighting for travel to the center of the earth. And the ride quality was precisely as the Queen would've specified: floaty. Floaty, and *exquisite.*

Of course, there were some flaws. Handling was awful, although some evidence indicated that the steering wheel was loosely connected to the front wheels. Gas mileage was similar to a troop transporter, or possibly a tractor-trailer hauling several troop transporters. I was afraid to floor the gas because even slightly tapping the accelerator sounded like drying my hair with a leafblower. And, finally, the ABS and traction control lights were on. That part didn't bother me since the brakes seemed to work well, unless you did something crazy like use them twice in a ten-minute period.

In other words: this was the finest '95 Range Rover still on the road.

My happiness subsided when I went to start the Range Rover one Saturday morning, just a week after I bought it. The keyless remote – which, unbelievably, still functioned – wasn't unlocking the doors, and the alarm light had stopped blinking. Surprising no one, including me, I was stranded just five days into Land Rover ownership. I called AAA and gave the dispatcher my vehicle's make and model. She chuckled and said: *"No wonder you have Triple-A."*

After a jumpstart, I took the Range Rover to my friend David's repair shop to find out exactly what was draining the battery.

They can't all be that bad.

Part 2: Yes, They Can All Be That Bad

From the outside, David's shop looks so dull and nondescript that you get the sense Osama bin Laden could still be alive and watching basic cable if only he, too, had been renting a warehouse in Norcross, Georgia.

It's the exact opposite inside, where there are always highly unique cars in some form of cleaning or disrepair. This time, there was a Hummer H1, an Ariel Atom, and a 1980s Lincoln limo that ran out of gas in rural South Carolina and had a Hemi installed to remedy the problem. There was also a Pontiac Aztek, which David proudly announced he was fixing up to flip for a profit. On that basis, I trusted him with my Range Rover. If this man can make money on an Aztek, he can do anything.

David couldn't duplicate the problem on the Rover's first night in the shop. While that's common with other cars, it's unusual for Land Rovers, which are generally happy to duplicate any problem at any moment and typically develop several new ones.

For the second night, I suggested that he lock it, as I was suspicious that the blinking alarm light was draining the battery. When David called the next morning, it turned out to be something else entirely.

"I'm standing next to the Range Rover," said David. "You're never going to believe what the problem is."

"What is it?"

"We pressed 'lock' on the remote and walked away from it," said David. "But then we heard a noise. We came back, and …"

It turned out that when you pressed the "lock" button on the key fob, the Range Rover's doors started to furiously lock and unlock *entirely on their own*, over and over, until the battery drained. *Lock, unlock. Lock, unlock. Lock, unlock.* The morning of my dead battery, this had apparently gone on all night until finally the battery went flat and the madness came to an end. David announced a new door lock actuator would be more than $600 plus installation. Of course, I declined the repair, meaning my Range Rover would, from then on, remain unlocked.

They can't all be that bad.

A few days later, I took the Range Rover through its first car wash. Admittedly, this was a stupid idea. Sure, you can take a 1995 Honda or a 1995 Toyota through a car wash. But a 1995 Range Rover? Why, that should be hand-washed by your servants while you commission paintings of yourself!

I discovered this when the Range Rover emerged from the car wash slightly less complete than when it went in. Namely, the rear bumper was missing both plastic end caps, which were highly important because they concealed the bumper's true identity: that of a metal pole with rust on either end. The car wash guys found the end caps for me, and – to preserve the Range Rover's gilded appearance – I hastily stuck them back in place. A few days later, they came off on the highway.

They can't all be that bad.

The next few months of Range Rover ownership went by uneventfully, aside from frequent trips to the gas station. In part, this was due to aerodynamics and a curb weight that rivaled a convention center.

Another reason the fuel stops were so constant is that I didn't trust the gas gauge, since it was installed by the same people who made the door locks. As a result, I filled up whenever it reached the halfway point, which it sometimes did right after I filled it up.

During one fuel stop, a woman with a Prius at the next pump asked: *"Does yours only cost $28 to fill up?"* Although she was being playful, she seemed genuinely unnerved when I told her I had two other V8-

powered cars back home. It was the high point of my Range Rover ownership experience.

The low point came a few weeks later, perhaps as karma for pounding my environmentally damaging chest to the Prius driver, or perhaps because the low point in any Range Rover ownership experience is never more than a few weeks away.

It happened on a Friday night as I was leaving for a movie. I started the Range Rover in front of my house, put it in reverse, and tried to shift into "drive." But the Range Rover was having none of it: the shift lever was completely stuck in reverse; the button couldn't be pressed. It wasn't going anywhere. (By coincidence, the movie was *James Bond*. You'd think the Range Rover would've been more supportive.)

The next morning, I was back on the phone with AAA, who sent a flatbed tow truck to pick up the Rover and bring it back to David's. The tow truck arrived and the driver laughed. *"Man, Land Rovers are half my business!"* I don't think he was lying.

I got a text message on Monday from David revealing the culprit: a piece of plastic about half the size of a dime had wedged itself into the gear selector. Once they took it out, all was well. Relatively speaking.

They can't all be that bad.

I was stunned. Just a few months earlier, the Range Rover was rendered unusable by its *door locks*. And now a broken piece of plastic smaller than a fingernail brought the 4,600-pound vehicle to its knees? *And Land Rover thought this thing could be used in the jungle?* Perhaps that could work if "the jungle" referred to a six-mile perimeter around David's shop. But if it were the *actual* jungle, tigers would eat the Range Rover's occupants when a broken dome light somehow caused it to roll over.

I asked David to have his detailers clean up the Range Rover. The next day, listed it on AutoTrader.com. I would soon be just one more car guy with a British car horror story.

The Range Rover was only on sale a few days before an interested buyer called on it from Houston. Unbelievably, he owned a stick shift Series I Land Rover Discovery – possibly the only vehicle less reliable

than the Range Rover – and clearly wanted to maximize the percentage of his paycheck that went to SUV repairs. But before he committed to buy the Range Rover, he wanted to have his Atlanta-area in-laws check it out. He gave them my number and told me to expect a call.

Just a few hours later, I heard from the buyer's father-in-law, who I first thought was attempting an Abe Simpson impersonation. Every second word was "*Whaaaat?*" no matter how loudly I yelled my responses, which – at this point – were to questions like "How are you doing today?" We hadn't even reached the hard stuff like "What's your name?"

After about five minutes of yelling on my end and "*Whaaaat?"* on his, the mother-in-law picked up a different handset of their landline phone. Since she heard and spoke better than her husband, she asked for directions to my place. She hadn't told me where she lived, but this didn't stop her from opening with: "Which way do I turn when I leave my neighborhood?"

For several minutes, I painstakingly provided the elderly couple with exact directions, narrating each turn with the precision of, well, Google Maps. I decided this would be easier than trying to throw technology into the mix by *actually suggesting Google Maps.*

Finally, after giving the very last direction and agreeing to meet around 10 am the following day, the mother-in-law asked: "So you're near Dunwoody?" As Dunwoody is 30 minutes north of me in a different county, I never expected to hear from them again, except maybe in a news story about a confused old couple who drove around Dunwoody for hours before succumbing to hunger because they didn't know how to find a restaurant using Google Maps.

But that wasn't the case. The following morning, the father-in-law showed up in a fairly new Lexus, arriving only an hour and a half late. After parking directly in front of my neighbor's driveway, he got out of the car with a small boy who was never introduced or addressed. I tossed him the keys to the Range Rover so he could provide a report to his son-in-law.

After all the directions and what must've been a two-hour pilgrimage during which he apparently adopted a child, the man drove it for approximately 30 seconds.

But his report must've been good, because the son-in-law called me back an hour later to make purchase arrangements. He, too, would ship it rather than fly in and drive it home. Because, undoubtedly, he, too, knew better than to drive a British car across three states.

As I helped load the Range Rover on a tractor-trailer transporter the following day, I silently hoped the new seller had his own David nearby. Because there was no avoiding it: yes, they *can* all be that bad.

26. AMG Wagon Mountain Run

It all started on Facebook. Everything starts on Facebook now, including human lives. Really: I have more than one friend who created a Facebook page for an unborn child using a sonogram image for the profile picture. Here's how I envision that going: the parents will update the account during the child's early years until one day, when the child is "old enough," they'll stage an exciting coming-of-age ceremony to give him the password. Then he will promptly defriend his parents.

This particular Facebook beginning came from my friend Ed, who sells Lamborghinis. Ed is very cool, primarily because he drives a bright orange Lamborghini that makes approximately the same amount noise as a controlled demolition.

Ed posted on Facebook one Saturday that the Lamborghini dealership would be hosting a mountain run. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the concept, this is when a bunch of guys with expensive sports cars get together, drive them hard for a Sunday afternoon, then return them to their usual places: on trickle chargers in climate-controlled garages.

Although I "only" had my E63 AMG wagon, I decided this event couldn't be missed. Sure, my wagon was no Ferrari or Lamborghini. But with more than 500 horsepower, it was capable of achieving anything those cars could, such as four to six miles per gallon. Nonetheless, aware of my car's position on the exotic car totem pole, I texted Ed for permission to come like a timid second-grader requesting a bathroom pass. He enthusiastically said yes.

I arrived at the Lamborghini dealer to find there were already about a dozen cars assembled, none of which were station wagons. The *least* station-wagonny of the bunch was a Porsche Carrera GT. Actually, the least station-wagonny was probably the Lotus Elise, but its owner – being a Lotus guy – had parked away from everyone else and was browsing his phone, probably in search of Lotus apparel.

We waited about 45 minutes before setting off. This was so that we could perform the tried-and-true mountain run ritual of a) looking at each other's cars, and b) talking about how we hoped we wouldn't get a ticket.

After a while, we finally started to head for the mountains. And if you've ever wondered how an AMG wagon compares to some of today's finest exotic cars, here's what happened.

Straight Roads

The road that leads to the North Georgia mountains is a long, straight one that usually includes more boiled peanut stands than traffic. The day we went up was no exception, so we drove it as a convoy, with our brightly colored sports cars speeding down the freeway like a mobile display of the one percent.

It is at this point I must assure you that I, under no circumstances, condone any form of street racing. In fact, I strongly discourage street racing, largely because most street racers have brains that are about the same size as a hotel room key. They prove this by street racing in densely populated urban areas often lined with spectators who always seem surprised when a car goes off the road and catches on fire. ("I can't believe it happened to Jimmy! He was always so careful, what with all the street racing.")

However, if you happen to be driving, say, an E63 AMG wagon, and you get up next to, say, an Aston Martin V8 Vantage, and you happen to put your foot down, you'd quickly discover that the AMG wagon is faster. You'd also discover that Aston drivers are sore losers who insist you "got a head start" no matter how many times they were beaten by a station wagon.

You might also discover something similar about the Ferrari 328 GTS.

And the Lotus Elise. And the new "991" Porsche 911. All of this, of course, is hypothetical, especially if you're a member of the Fayette County Sheriff's Department. Really, officer: we were just eager to get some boiled peanuts.

Twisty Roads

So the wagon is fast. But we already *know* the wagon is fast. Otherwise it would just be a typical station wagon, and I wouldn't be writing about it unless I worked for Consumer Reports. (In which case I would say things like: *The rear liftgate automatically closes in a jiffy.*) The real question is: how does it keep up with the sports cars in the mountains?

And the answer is: it varies.

I know, I know. You're groaning. You're thinking: *For God's sake, just tell me if the AMG wagon will keep up with sports cars! Can't you just give me THAT?* But this is a complex subject, so I'll address it like this.

If you're in your AMG wagon and you're trying to keep up with a group of well-trained drivers, you're going to have some trouble. The AMG wagon just wasn't built for high-speed cornering, and this becomes incredibly clear the second you attempt any high-speed cornering. The tires squeal, the body rolls, and you really feel like you shouldn't be anywhere *near* the mountains with this thing unless you're driving your kids to a sleepaway summer camp.

But if you're in your AMG wagon and you're trying to keep up with a group of gentlemen exotic car owners who mainly believe the purpose of owning a Ferrari is to be seen at upscale suburban steakhouses, you'll be just fine. The tires still squeal, and the body still rolls, but you don't really care because you're having way more fun than everyone else. While they're worried about scratches and dings, you're thinking: *I just passed a Maserati in my station wagon!*

I know this because our group was comprised of gentlemen exotic car owners, and boy did the wagon do a lot of passing. This included speeding right by an Aston Martin whose owner was smoking a cigar. *On a mountain run.*

But even in a group like that, there are always one or two thrill-seekers who really do push their limits. On our run, it was the guys driving the Ferrari that ended up in the ditch.

Yes, that's right. We came around a corner to find a beautiful 550 Maranello – the front-engine, V12-powered successor to the timeless Testarossa – with its front end pointing towards the road and its rear against a mountain. We all pulled over to check on the driver, which probably looked like Jay Leno's garage had thrown up in the North Georgia mountains.

After making sure the Ferrari occupants were OK, we all left the area. The police were called, and staying at the scene only meant we were all at risk for a ticket. While the Lamborghini drivers had no trouble leaving their damaged Ferrari brethren behind, it ruined the mood for the rest of us.

Only a few miles later, we came to a rest stop and several of us decided to head back. That included me. I already saw what the E63 could do, and I was impressed: it ran with the exotics in a straight line, and it managed to keep up in the corners. Not bad for a seven-seater station wagon with a 4,400-pound curb weight.

As we started to pull away, someone suggested assembling the cars for a group picture. We all agreed, and arranged them in a brightly colored semi-circle. Gotta have something to show the unborn children on Facebook.

27. 2004 Cadillac CTS-V – Review

When I was a child, I had some neighbors with a Cadillac. They were either very old or very confused, but probably both since they put their license plate renewal decals on the trunk.

This was the early 1990s, when nobody had a Cadillac. Seriously: the lineup consisted of the Seville, the DeVille, the Eldorado and the Fleetwood Brougham, which was larger than most New York City apartments. None of those sound appealing even by car enthusiast standards, which seem to consist of: once a car is cancelled, it automatically becomes good, especially if it was designed at a time when fuel was cheaper than postage.

In the late 1990s, Cadillac finally started becoming acceptable again thanks to the Catera. Hah! Just kidding. Of course, I mean the Escalade; the Catera simply confused Cadillac buyers by being small enough to fit in a modern garage.

While the Escalade's runaway success brought Cadillac back from the brink of Lincoln-style obscurity, its popularity seemed to surprise the brand. Four model years went by before they followed it up with something totally new. This may have been because GM's strategy at the time was: "If it will be successful, do something else." Which, incidentally, was borrowed from Acura and explains every generation of the RL.

When Cadillac finally brought a new product to the table, it came in

the form of the 2003 CTS: a rear-wheel drive sedan designed by someone who must've been told that using curves would result in his next company car being a Cavalier. I can only assume he also designed the GMC Terrain, this time under threat of Chevy Spark.

I briefly owned the high-performance CTS-V, which debuted in 2004. These are my thoughts.

Why Did I Buy It?

There are two main answers to this question. The first is obvious: it's fast. The CTS-V's powertrain isn't even from a *normal* Corvette, but rather from a Corvette Z06, which is better because a) it's faster, and b) it has those little inlets in front of its rear wheels.

The second reason I bought the CTS-V is probably more important. I found it privately listed on AutoTrader.com and decided to take a test drive, only to discover the owner was a Korean kid who had lost his visa and was getting deported in less than a week. That allowed me to make a wild lowball offer with the price, which is a story told elsewhere in this book. Years later, as he sits in fear of a crazy dictator just a few hundred miles away, I feel a little bad about all of this. Especially because he left a nice motorcycle helmet in the trunk.

On the Road

The first-generation CTS-V had traditional sport suspension instead of the later models' GM MagneRide. That's fine, because in spite of a dozen videos on GM's press site narrated by engineers wearing lab coats, no one has any idea what MagneRide actually does. I do know it includes magnets, which means you can probably put those tiny refrigerator words on the shock absorbers.

The CTS-V's sport suspension served two functions. One was to provide good handling – and the CTS-V was, by all measures, absolutely excellent. I later had a Panamera company car, and I actually believe the CTS-V handled better at the limit. This could be because the Panamera is only slightly smaller than Middle Earth.

The other function of the CTS-V's suspension was to provide a bone-jarring ride possibly designed to let you feel every single bump, pothole and small insect on the road. The ride alone would disappoint my early-1990s Cadillac-owning neighbors, who probably would've sold the car before they attempted to get an emissions test at a drive-

thru ATM.

Regardless, I could handle the rough ride because I was a young guy who wanted one thing: *powaaaah!* And the CTS-V had that. Cadillac said it did 0-to-60 in 4.6 seconds on its way to a quarter mile in 13.1. These are important numbers to memorize when you live in the South.

The problem was that no one who ever drove a stock CTS-V could actually replicate these figures. There were two reasons. One was that, with any attempt, the differential would fail. Early CTS-Vs were famous for exploding differentials, and GM was equally famous for denying warranty claims with reasons like: *"You were driving in a straight line."* or: *"You were parked in a parking lot where differentials are known to fail."*

Beyond the differential, the car couldn't reach its full potential because the gear lever had obviously been designed by a GM engineer whose only experience with a manual transmission came on the Bloomfield Hills High School rowing team. As a result, the stick shift was designed like a boat oar, with about as much play. Seriously: it could be moved about an inch to the left or right *when it was in gear*. After I sold the car, the next owner had a short shifter installed before I even gave him the spare key.

And the Design?

In spite of its curveless creases, the CTS-V's exterior was a major strong point. I always buy my cars in the color from the press photos (well, except for that damn pewter station wagon), which, in the CTS-V's case, meant I had to go with black. Personally, I felt the factory bodykit was subtle and handsome, yet muscular in a "Luke, I am your father" sort of way. And the 18-inch wheels completed the package, even though they were largely responsible for the elderly-disorienting ride.

The interior was also generally good thanks to comfortable seats, a thick steering wheel and air-conditioning vents that – despite a cheap look and feel – could be moved to blow air on precisely any small square inch of the cabin you wanted. Rear seat room was good, and trunk space was excellent, especially for storing motorcycle helmets.

But this was GM in the early 2000s, so there were some downsides. The biggest was the center stack. That's because it was made from plastic that was clearly sourced to the lowest bidder, who created it

during bathroom breaks in a factory that made Wal-Mart deck chairs.

The other major issue was that, for some reason, the car had a foot-mounted parking brake. That meant there were *four pedals* on the floor. And the one you didn't want to touch for any reason was only a few inches from the one you had to touch every time you changed gears.

The Verdict

Owning the CTS-V taught me a few things. Number one: unless it's an Escalade, most people still don't have very strong perceptions of Cadillac. And when you say things like "Four hundred horsepower" and "Chevrolet Corvette zee oh six," they get bored and pull out their iPhones to play Words With Friends. This didn't bother me. If it bothers you, BMW makes some pretty damn good cars, all of which are probably on their first differential.

Number two: no car, in the history of cars, should be saddled with a transmission this awful. I've driven the latest CTS-V and the transmission is much improved, but that doesn't do much for people out there driving first-gens. My suggestion: get a short shifter. And for God's sake, don't accidentally press the parking brake when you're using it.

Most importantly, though, I've learned that an automaker really can go from the Fleetwood Brougham to a credible performance car in just a few short years. All it takes to get there is a big SUV.

28. Meeting Ralph Lauren

I don't mean to brag or anything, but I recently became close personal friends with Ralph Lauren.

OK, maybe I'm exaggerating a little. For instance: by "recently," I mean my friendship with Ralph started about six years ago. And by "close personal friends," I mean we spoke only once, briefly. But I really felt like we connected.

Of course, I've *tried* to sit down with Ralph again. My usual strategy involves showing up at Ralph Lauren World Headquarters with an "I LOVE YOU RALPH" cardboard sign and my Polo chest tattoo, but his staff always sees to it that I'm arrested. Overprotective bastards.

The story of our meeting begins in 2005. Actually, it really begins in 1939, when Ralph was born to Polish immigrants in the Bronx. I discovered this on Wikipedia, though I have no doubt Ralph would've told me himself if only his publicist hadn't pursued that restraining order.

Anyway: in 2005, as a 17-year-old car enthusiast, I saw my first Porsche Carrera GT. Exotic cars didn't excite me much back then, largely because I lived in Colorado, where you can drive one for about four months each year. They lie dormant in garages for the other eight months, like a hibernating bear that's hooked up to a battery tender.

But my feelings changed when I saw the Carrera GT. Suddenly, I understood the appeal: the sound. The styling. The incredibly low speed at which you must drive over bumps.

As a high schooler, I quickly told all of my friends about the Carrera GT. That's because high schoolers are always bragging about everything, from the girls they've been with to how they vomited after three beers.

The problem with all of this bragging is that it makes high schoolers a very distrustful lot. That was especially true in the days before the camera phone. Back then, no one believed *anything*. For example: you'd say "I hooked up with Suzy Smith," and no one would believe you, and Suzy Smith certainly wouldn't verify it because she was the one you vomited on.

I gather that today's high schoolers, members of the camera phone era, are *waaaay* less skeptical. That's because they can show each other pictures of the girls they've been with, which almost always leads to someone's parents getting called. Unfortunately, you can't get in trouble for showing off pictures of vomit, and high schoolers take full advantage of that.

Where I'm going with this is that everyone thought I was lying about the Carrera GT. They dismissed it as lame bragging, the kind that – in middle school – would've been followed with "*If you don't believe me, you can call my mom*." So I did the same thing that any normal, well-adjusted person would do: I started carrying a digital camera everywhere I went.

The initial plan was to get a picture of a Carrera GT and prove everyone wrong. I felt this would elevate my social status to the point where Suzy Smith would look at me and say: *"Aren't you the kid who carries a digital camera everywhere?"* before handing me a dry-cleaning bill.

But there weren't any Carrera GTs immediately forthcoming. So I moved on to another idea entirely: taking pictures of *other* exotic cars. For instance: I'd see a Ferrari or a Lamborghini and I would take a picture of it, providing photographic evidence that I can, in fact, notice the flashiest and most brightly colored vehicles on the road.

I didn't do this for my friends. No, this was for me. I enjoyed finding the cars, photographing them, and frequently scaring their owners, who would say things like: *"Hey! What are you doing in my garage? Get out of here!"*

Ahh, those were the days.

At the same time I was driving around and taking pictures of exotic cars, the Bugatti Veyron was gaining a lot of press in the car world. It was just coming out, and between its top speed, its high price, and the Volkswagen Group PR machine, journalists were having a field day. Literally, they had a field day: the 50-yard dash was against a Veyron towing another Veyron. (When my girlfriend read this, she said: *"Did they really do that?"*)

For proof, this is a sampling of headlines from when the Veyron came out in 2005:

BUGATTI VEYRON DOES 250 MPH *–Car & Driver*

BUGATTI VEYRON IS FASTEST CAR EVER *–Automobile Magazine*

JESUS RETURNS, HAS DUAL-CLUTCH TRANSMISSION *–Motor Trend*

SCIENTISTS LOOK TO VEYRON FOR HELP MAPPING GENOME *– The Washington Post*

CITY PROMISES TO RESTORE POWER BY 2015 *–The Detroit Free Press*

This was highly exciting to a young car enthusiast who once photographed the taillights of a Ferrari F40 as it was driving away. So I added the Veyron to the top of my "want list" of cars to photograph. The only problem was that my odds of seeing one in Denver were about the same as my odds of waking up one morning, walking out my front door, and going for a quick dip in the ocean.

But that all changed the day Ralph and I became close personal friends.

This part of the story starts in July 2007. I was on vacation with my girlfriend in a section of Colorado that's roughly 35 percent federal land, 25 percent private land, and 40 percent Ralph Lauren's massive, sprawling ranch. Seriously: if you start holding your breath at Ralph's first fencepost, you'll die of hypoxia before you reach his actual home, and they'll have your funeral before you pass the barn.

So I told my girlfriend to look out for Ralph and his exotic cars, in case he happened to be in town. And she – being an eagle-eyed car spotter who once confused a Lotus with a Nissan Sentra – promptly fell asleep.

But she awoke with a jolt a few minutes later when I saw Ralph's Veyron coming the other way. It happened, as I recall, like this:

4:07 p.m.: Driving past Ralph's ranch.
4:48 p.m.: Driving past Ralph's ranch.
5:03 p.m.: See Ralph's Veyron.
5:03:01 p.m.: Begin screaming at the top of my lungs.

Once again, I did what any reasonable, well-adjusted person would do: I executed a three-point turn in the middle of a state highway. I know this doesn't sound safe, but I really took a lot of factors into consideration, such as whether my camera was charged.

Ralph pulled into a parking lot a few miles later. I stopped about 50 feet away, keen to look like someone other than the crazy person I so clearly was. And that's when Ralph rolled down his window and motioned for me to "come here."

I should mention now that, by coincidence, I was wearing a Polo shirt that day. And so (after I opened with *"What's it like, Ralph?"* and he replied by saying *"It's amazing"*) he announced: *"I like your shirt."*

Ralph Lauren, ladies and gentlemen: Billionaire. Bugatti owner. Proprietor of a ranch the size of Delaware. *Admirer of my fashion sense.*

Our close personal friendship really grew from there. First, I would ask a question, such as: *"H- h- how does it drive?"* And then Ralph would reply by saying, for example, *"That was a pretty nice move you pulled back there. Want to try it yourself?"*

No, really, what he actually said was that he enjoyed the Veyron very much but that he – and this is a direct quote – "obeys all posted speed limits." Once I ran out of things to say (And what do you really say? *"Oh, Ralph, what kind of gas mileage do you get?"* Hell no, you don't say that.), he drove off, leaving us with our jaws on the floor.

Ralph's Veyron wasn't the Carrera GT: it was better. But most

importantly, I made a new friend. Really: just ask him. Assuming, of course, that you can get past his publicist.

29. Driving in Europe

Most Americans fear driving in Europe. This is not conjecture, like virtually everything else I write, but rather a proven fact. I've always found this unusual because Americans don't seem to mind driving in the US. In fact, they think it's *so* easy to drive here that they often do it in conjunction with other activites, such as gift wrapping. But Americans fear driving in Europe like it's one of those mini golf courses where you could, at any moment, be diverted off course by a giant clown head.

My parents are classic examples. By all accounts, they're great drivers, as proven by the fact that my father has not received a traffic ticket since 1969. (It should be noted that he disputes the accuracy of this ticket.) But when I suggested they rent a car on a recent Europe trip, my parents acted like they were going to some third-world country where the very act of operating a motor vehicle is punishable by watching a soccer game from start to finish. (This is the worst sentence you can give an American.)

Personally, I love driving in Europe. I know what you're thinking: *Are you an idiot? Everyone knows Europe has efficient public transit that you can ride without being spit on!* But I swear there are benefits to renting a car in Europe. I will now describe them before you write an Amazon review of this book that says: "Decent book, but this guy *rents cars in Europe.*" They are:

1. I can go anywhere. Here's the main problem with trains: you can only go where they do. Say you're cruising along in a train, sitting next to some European guy engaged in European activities, such as chain smoking, or possibly protesting, which are really the only things Europeans do if you ask Americans. (Also, soccer.)

Suddenly, you see something cool out the window. Your first thought, as an American tourist, is: *I must take a picture of that.* (This is different from your first thought as a Japanese tourist, which would be: *I must take many pictures of that.*) But you're stuck on the train, and you can't go anywhere until you reach the next stop, which could be miles away and possibly in a different country. You'll know from the language on the protest signs.

Meanwhile, I can stop and take as many pictures as I want in a car, at least until the giant clown head eats my camera.

2. European car rental is cheap. Actually, it's *really* cheap. I once rented a Volkswagen Polo in Europe for $19 per day including full insurance coverage. You must get full coverage in Europe, and if you don't believe me, keep reading.

Rental cars are so cheap because they have to compete with the trains. That's because you, Mr. or Mrs. World Traveler, are absolutely convinced the trains are better, even though we've already established that riding on them mainly involves missed photographic opportunities.

3. No train schedules. In many European countries, such as Germany, trains run on precise timetables that cannot be violated, or else they could sentence the train conductor to watch a baseball game. (This is the worst punishment you can give a European.)

But that isn't true in all of Europe. Spain, for example, appears to publish train schedules for the sole purpose of showing the rest of the world that they do, in fact, possess both clocks and trains. They've never actually *followed* one of these schedules, however, as that would require taking a break from all the protesting.

4. I can park at my hotel. This is an important one. In Europe, which – as the Europeans like to remind us – was built long before America, every single street between the train station and your hotel is made of widely spaced cobblestones. The result is that, when you roll your luggage behind you, it constantly tips over and gets stuck in cracks. When you go to pick it up, you will be pickpocketed. This alone is worth the price of a rental car, even if it's a Volkswagen Polo.

OK: so we've established that renting a car in Europe is the way to go. But to prove just how great it is, I'm going to provide a blow-by-blow account of my last trip there.

Germany

My Europe trips always started in Germany because that's where my employer flew me for free. Of course, by "free" what I really mean is that I first had to endure a week-long business trip to Stuttgart, which isn't exactly charming, unless you visit during the four days each June when the sun comes out and they take the tourism photographs.

Stuttgart has other problems besides the weather. For instance: the

hotel rooms are very European, which is to say mostly unfurnished. And asking for, say, an extra blanket receives a response like: *"Vut other blanket? You haf towels in your bathroom, no?"* Also: although most German offices aren't air conditioned, they insist you wear a suit and tie like you're on the set of *Mad Men*. This wouldn't be so bad except the attitude towards deodorant is largely the same as the attitude towards extra blankets.

So the first thing I did at the end of each business trip was get in a car and head for the border. Last time, that car was a BMW 120d Cabriolet. For those of you in North America, imagine a regular 1-Series Cabriolet, but with the acceleration of a porch swing.

If you haven't been, here's what it's like to drive on the autobahn. For a while, everyone cruises along at the same speed, which is around 70 miles per hour. Then you see a sign with a slash through a circle. This functions like the mechanical rabbit at a greyhound race, causing *every single driver* to floor the accelerator, regardless of whether they're in a tiny diesel hatchback, or a slightly larger diesel hatchback. (These are the only vehicles available in Germany, and they're all silver.)

The result is dozens of cars driving 120 miles per hour, somehow avoiding the tractor-trailer trucks driving 50 miles per hour. This is even more astounding when you consider the tractor-trailers still pull the same passing moves as they do in the States, which involves one truck going 51 miles per hour while passing a second truck going 50 miles per hour.

Eventually, you see a new speed limit sign and everyone slams on the brakes, completely calm about the fact that they spent the last 20 minutes cruising at 120 miles per hour. And so goes the autobahn, regardless of the weather, the time of day, or the age of your diesel hatchback.

But it's important to note that you can't go whatever speed you want just because you're on the autobahn. I learned this on my first trip to Germany, when I racked up two speed camera tickets *in one single night*. This brings us to an important point, namely that most of Germany has speed limits.

But the parts that are limitless *really are* limitless. At one point in the 120d, I was driving at high speed on a particularly empty section, which – as an American – meant I was trying to snap a photo of the

speedometer. During a momentary glance at the road, I noticed a German police car ahead of me. So I did what any American would: I dove into the right lane and slammed on the brakes.

As I sat contemplating my next move, an Audi sped by from behind, passing the police car and me. Admiring his example, I summoned every bit of courage I had, floored the accelerator, signaled, and went around the cop at 125 miles per hour. In America, this would've resulted in one of those arrests where the officer opens his door, aims his gun, tells you to get on the ground, and then beats you with his nightstick. In Germany, it was just another day on the autobahn.

After a while, I reached…

Switzerland

When it comes to cars, Switzerland is a land of contradictions. When it comes to everything else, there are no contradictions. The Swiss simply wouldn't allow it, as it goes against their obsession with order and rules. If the Swiss happened to notice a contradiction, say, walking down the street, they would immediately stop it and ask to see its papers, after which they would deport it to Italy. There are *tons* of contradictions in Italy, like the fact that your house number doesn't match your mailing address, not that it matters because mail is only delivered when the people aren't protesting. (Which is never.)

Anyway: Switzerland is automotively unusual because the cars contradict the roads. Allow me to explain.

Switzerland is tremendously wealthy. And I don't mean wealthy in an "Oh, the guy next door bought a lamp from Room & Board" sense. I mean the people have an enormous amount of money, which they use – as you and I would – to purchase ridiculous cars. But here's the weird part: once the Swiss buy these cars, they remove the badges so you have *absolutely no idea* what they've bought. Seriously: I've never seen so many E63 AMG station wagons that looked like E200 diesels.

The roads are even stranger. Even though every single Swiss person drives an AMG Mercedes or an Audi RS6, speed limits are enforced as *actual* limits. As a result, you cannot risk driving even one mile per hour above the speed limit, or you'll probably be sent to some sort of Swiss work camp that involves cutting chocolate into tiny little perfect squares.

So Switzerland's car culture in a nutshell: you have an M5, but you make it look – and drive – like a 518i.

The strict traffic enforcement even applies to tourists. In fact, the Swiss government is known to hunt down anyone who gets a ticket in the country, even if the offender was an American who was caught doing two kilometers per hour over the speed limit while jogging.

My point here is: drive carefully in Switzerland. It's the exact opposite in…

Italy

Italy is by far my favorite place to drive in Europe, largely because the only discernible rule appears to be: *Enjoy yourself.*

This is especially true on the highways. Yes, Germany is home to the *actual* autobahn. But the Italian autostrada is more exciting. That's because – while they have speed limits – they're enforced *by the Italians,* who are mainly preoccupied with their hair. So people drive as fast as they choose, which leads to frequent situations where a speeding Porsche 911 will pass, say, an ox cart built around the time of Marco Polo.

I tended to stick to around 20 kilometers per hour over the speed limit, a number I refer to as "Cautious American." Cautious European, meanwhile, is closer to 30 kilometers over, while Cautious Italian is whatever speed you can possibly drive that keeps your total number of annual vehicle-ox cart collisions in the single digits. This, it should be noted, can be deducted from your Italian income taxes, which you mail every January so the government receives them by March.

The "enjoy yourself" mentality continues when you leave the highway, especially if you're on a scooter. In a normal US city, you drive your car at a reasonable speed, you stop for the lights, you signal your lane changes, and everyone's happy. In a normal *Italian* city, you do basically none of these things while constantly being passed on all sides by scooters, even if you're sitting in your driveway.

Seriously: the scooters are everywhere. You may *think* you're the first car stopped for a red light, for instance, but you will actually be surrounded by no less than a dozen scooters before the light turns green, even if you're driving a subway train. The only exception is in

Venice, where there are no cars or scooters, and you're finally free of all those buzzing noises.

On my 120d Cabriolet trip, the most exciting aspect of Italian road travel was the narrow two-lane road leading to Bellagio, a touristy town on beautiful Lake Como. This road was approximately wide enough for one normal-sized vehicle and one smaller object, such as a prosthetic limb, which meant the Italians used it as a bus route.

So what happens is you come around a curve – and *of course* the road is curvy and *of course* it has sheer cliffs and *of course* the only guardrails are randomly spaced cement blocks installed during the Mussolini era – and there's a huge bus coming from the other direction. You come to a complete stop and brace for impact, but the bus driver continues moving at the same speed, roughly defined as "*As fast as he can possibly go.*" And as you sit in horror, hoping he won't take off your mirror, a scooter passes between you and the bus.

I was once on this road behind a cement truck when we encountered a bus coming the opposite direction. The result was that everyone in the town got out to a) watch, and b) scream things while making grand gestures with their hands. I turned around and went back the other direction, so I'm not entirely sure how it ended up, but if I were to guess I'd say the cement truck driver probably took up residence in a nearby apartment.

And so it goes in Italy, until I entered…

Monaco

Monaco is a resort town on the French Riviera that believes it is a country. I'm not sure why it thinks this, though I suspect it's because France is too afraid to tell it otherwise.

Driving in Monaco is fairly limited. There are only about nine roads. All are very narrow, and all are named after a dead member of the royal family. But on this trip, my most memorable car experience didn't even involve the roads.

It started when the phone rang in my hotel room. It was the hotel front desk: the 120d rental, and several other guests' cars, had been burglarized. I needed to go survey the damage.

So, accompanied by the bellhop, I went to the hotel's underground parking garage, which turned out to be a public parking lot that cost half as much as the hotel was charging us for parking. While this upset me, I was even more distressed to see the damage to the 120d: its top had been slashed open. The thieves had jumped in, unlocked the door and trashed the car. Fortunately, the only missing item was my iPod, which had been stored inside a closed compartment in the center console. Even though I saw nothing and the theft happened at 3 a.m., I had to go to the police station and give a statement.

I was escorted to the Monaco police station by the hotel staff, who told me I was the first guest of several who would have to make the trip that day. Upon arrival, I was greeted by a detective who spoke little English but would take my statement anyway.

He took me downstairs to his office, which had so many randomly strewn papers that it appeared he may have personally arrested, booked, tried and sentenced every criminal in Monaco's history. This may have actually been true, since – in a land of 35,000 with the highest per capita income in the world – how much crime can there be?

The answer, I quickly deduced, was not much. I came to this conclusion because he treated this case as if a murder had been committed, possibly of a member of the royal family. On more than one occasion he assured me with certainty that they would catch *Whoever Did This.*

Using broken English, the detective took my statement by asking

questions in French and translating it using one or two English keywords. For example, “How old are you?” became “You, old?” while “What is your job?” was roughly translated as “occupay…” and the hand motion of writing. He was excited to learn I worked for Porsche. I didn’t mention the sweaty German offices.

After I told the detective that all I lost was a blue iPod, he took me to another room where I was fingerprinted. Truly. He told me the plan was to dust *the entire car* for prints, and they wanted to eliminate mine. (Mind you, *this was a rental car.*) I was incredulous, thinking about how this would’ve been treated in New York City. I know about New York’s lax attitude because I’ve seen a lot of Law and Order SVU, and Ice-T has never fingerprinted anyone.

After the fingerprinting, I left the police station and faced a new, more important problem: the car had a hole in its roof. Worse, it was cut right above the driver’s seat. The resulting flap hanging in my face gave me tremendous insight into the life of a sheepdog.

Fortunately, the hole didn’t cause much of a problem. The hotel put on some duct tape, which lasted a few hours. And my trip ended the following day, rain-free.

In the End

There’s an epilogue to this story. After about six weeks, the rental car company assessed the damage and billed me for my entire deductible, which was around $1,700. (I told you the insurance is important.) I passed the charge along to the hotel, which had been highly apologetic the entire time – a fact that didn’t stop them from charging me for our room *and* our breakfast. Graciously, they comped parking.

About six weeks after that, I received a letter in the mail from the government of Monaco. It informed me that the detective was true to his word: *Whoever Did This* had indeed been brought to justice, and his trial was set for a few weeks later. Although my French was a bit rusty from my high school days, I think I had been invited to watch.

Another six weeks went by and yet another package arrived in the mail from Monaco, this one a bit heavier than the last. I opened it to find a blue iPod, which – while similar to the one stolen from my car – was decidedly not *my* blue iPod. It was an entirely different shade of blue, an entirely different model, and full of French rap music.

I have two theories about what happened. Number one is some poor, law-abiding French rap fan is now in jail for a crime he didn't commit. The second is that the actual culprit and had so many blue iPods they just picked one from the pile and sent it to me. I prefer that scenario because it helps me sleep at night, especially as I listen to my new French rap music.

The lesson here is simple: go visit Europe. Yes, it's expensive to go, expensive to stay and expensive to eat. But it's worth it, as a land of many diverse, fun-loving cultures, and also the Swiss. Plus: you may even get some new music out of it. Just as long as you don't take the trains.

30. First-Generation Toyota Prius – Review

Let's talk Prius. If you don't want to talk Prius, you're not fit to be a Prius owner. A true Prius owner *always* wants to talk Prius, especially at the gas station next to people in larger, thirstier vehicles. I know this because I was once on the receiving end of someone who wanted to talk Prius as I filled up my old Range Rover, and the conversation went like this:

Prius Owner: *Betcha wish you had a Prius, huh? I get fifty miles per gallon! And I never spend eighty bucks on gas!*

Me: *Yeah, but… you have a Prius.*

This caused the Prius owner to drive off in low-emissions anger.

Little did I know I would soon have a first-generation Prius of my own. Although I've covered my attempt to sell it elsewhere in this book, here's a basic overview of how I came to buy it:

1. A college friend asked for used car advice.
2. I told him to buy a Sentra, or a Civic, or a bicycle, or a riding lawnmower, *but whatever you do DO NOT buy a Prius because the battery will fail.*
3. He bought a Prius.
4. The battery failed.
5. He paid $4,000 for a new battery.
6. He crashed the Prius into a pole during a snowstorm, thereby

leaving a permanent dent in the rear quarter panel that looked like someone attempted to gain access to the trunk using a medieval battering ram.
7. He sold the entire car to me for $3,000.

So I was now driving a brand new hybrid battery with a car wrapped around it. Most of a car, anyway, because the rear quarter panel was starting to rust. This was happening despite my friend's high-quality repair job, which apparently involved repainting the dent with a can of spray paint that could only have been purchased by someone who had absolutely no idea what color the car was.

My goal was to own the Prius for a few months as a daily driver before flipping it for a profit. This gave me some serious seat time, which means I can provide you, the lucky reader, with a comprehensive review.

Styling

First, we're going to address styling. Clearly, these words were never stated by anyone at Toyota while the first-generation Prius was in development. This is obvious when you consider the following flaws:

1. The wheels are incredibly small. Seriously: you could stack about four Prius wheels on top of each other before you get to the side windows.

2. The car has nostrils. I have no idea why this is. However, the nostrils are possibly the only real point of style, except for…

3. The driver-side C-pillar has some sort of vent on it. Apparently this is an air vent for the battery pack, which I brag about to people at gas stations. (*"Does your big SUV have a battery pack air vent? Oh that's right: you don't have a battery pack! Toodles!"* Whrrrrr….)

4. There is a huge dent in the rear quarter panel that's poorly masked by what appears to be spray paint. Though the car has 120,000 miles, a typical Toyota customer would drive it to the dealer and request a buyback.

OK, so maybe I'm being a little harsh. In reality, the Prius looks a lot like any other small Japanese car of its day, which is to say boring until you get in an accident, at which point it more resembles a crushed soda can.

Interior

There are three reasons why the interior is the best part of a first-generation Prius. Number one: it has a center-mounted touchscreen that shows exactly what fuel economy you're getting. This is highly useful when you sell your Prius, as you can reset the display, coast down a hill, and photograph the ensuing "86.4 mpg" readout. CHA-CHING!

The second highlight is the gear lever, which rises from the steering column at a very severe angle. The benefit of this is obvious, but I will explain it anyway for you non-Prius people:

Say you're in a normal car. You're driving down the road and something awful comes on the radio, like one of those commercials where people are complaining about bowel movements, or worse: "Black and Yellow" by Wiz Khalifa. You quickly move to turn on something better, such as a local AM station broadcasting a test signal. And, boom! The offending noise is gone, hopefully never to return.

But things are a bit different in the Prius. The moment you hear the first chorus to "Black and Yellow," (which goes: *Black and yellow, black and yellow, uh huh, black and yellow, black and yellow*) you stab at the radio, just as you would in a normal car. But your motion is blocked by the gear lever, which you've now just thrown into reverse. The car spins out and crashes into a pole, leaving a large dent in the trunk that you will later fix with spray paint. This adds character.

The interior's third advantage is its most important asset. The severely angled gear lever has a shift boot, which is made of vinyl, as shift boots often are. But here's the kicker: it has a *zipper*. This has no earthly explanation except to give you something to do as you drive, because you definitely won't be enjoying that. Speaking of which…

Driving Experience

I'm not going to beat around the bush: the Prius is awful to drive. Most of the reason for this is its 1.5-liter engine that only makes 70 horsepower. This may have been acceptable thirteen years ago, but it's now only slightly more powerful than a television remote.

As a result, acceleration is labored. A lot of Prius people say things

like: *"hybrids are so fast off the line because of all that low-end torque from the electric motor."* But Prius people can't be trusted, because they bought a Prius. Plus, this statement assumes the electric motor is can offset the vehicle's weight, which it can't, probably because the electric motor is borrowed directly from an actual television remote.

Handling isn't exactly a prize either, since the incredibly small wheels fit on incredibly small tires. This makes the car feel like it's tilted to one side during all turns, including low-speed parallel parking. (This is in contrast to high-speed parallel parking, which is probably how you get enormous dents in the trunk.)

Speaking of enormous dents in the trunk: if you have such a dent, your Prius's rear wheel may scrape against the wheel arch every time you go over a bump, or when you have something in the trunk, or when you're simply driving along normally. Just a brief thought if you happen to consider violently changing the radio station.

Conclusion

If you're considering a used Prius, I offer this sage advice: buy a Sentra, or a Civic, or a bicycle, or a riding lawnmower, *but whatever you do DO NOT buy a Prius because the battery will fail.* But if the battery *does* fail, please put in a new one and sell it to me, because I sold mine for a reasonable profit. This doesn't surprise me, because who *wouldn't* want a car that gets 86.4 mpg? CHA-CHING!

31. A Comparison: Nissan LEAF vs. Honda Fit

I have a friend who really hates the Nissan LEAF. I mean, he *despises* it. If it cost $9.50 and had a 1,200-mile range, he would say something like: "Jeez, for nine fifty, you'd think they could make it cross the country."

I, on the other hand, take a slightly more open-minded view. I think the technology behind the LEAF is pretty cool. I like the idea of never putting gas in a car. And the lease deal is amazing. I've attempted to explain these benefits to my friend, but he maintains that no sane person would ever buy a LEAF when the gas-powered Honda Fit costs so much less and doesn't require hefty doses of Xanax for range anxiety.

Fortunately, I can now put this argument to rest. That's because I recently had the chance to drive the updated 2013 LEAF at an event near Nissan's headquarters in Nashville, which – for you foreigners – is a medium-sized city located in Taylor Swift County, Tennessee.

I have compared the LEAF and Fit in several crucial categories, using painstaking effort to ensure the accuracy of my data as long as it was easily located with a Google search. This is what I've found.

Acceleration

The most important category for any car enthusiast is, of course, acceleration. Unless you're one of those handling people, in which case you probably shouldn't be reading a comparison test of the Nissan LEAF and the Honda Fit.

Anyway, the LEAF and Fit accelerate exactly the same: very slowly. I have no idea what the actual 0-to-60 times are, but if I had to provide a general guess, it would probably be somewhere in the ten-second to 45-minute range. You will lose stoplight races to landscaping crews.

However, there *is* a clear winner here. While the Fit has to build power like a normal gasoline engine, the LEAF has access to its full range of torque the second you press the pedal. As a result, you *might* beat landscaping crews from 0 to 15 mph. **Advantage: LEAF**.

Driving Feel

I haven't forgotten about you handling people. But Nissan and Honda have! Just kidding: the LEAF and Fit handle just fine. They also go over bumps just fine, and go around turns just fine, and have acceptable visibility and a normal amount of wind noise.

A typical car reviewer would try and explain each of these things in minute detail and find slight advantages, but I'm going to level with you: a normal driver wouldn't notice major differences between the two cars. However, in the LEAF, a normal driver wouldn't notice these differences while his hands were on a standard heated steering wheel. **Advantage: LEAF**.

Fuel Economy and Range Anxiety

This one is important, so listen up. The Honda Fit gets 27 mpg city and 33 mpg highway. The Nissan LEAF, which does not use fuel, gets 106 mpg city and 92 mpg highway based on a calculation understood solely by the EPA and a reader who will e-mail me and make me feel like an idiot. ("You just divide the amperes by the kilowatts and subtract the electropositivity, DUH. It's like Physics 101. What were you, a history major?")

Yes, it's true that you don't have to put gas in a LEAF. But the LEAF is saddled with long charge times compared to typical refueling stops, even with the new 6.6-kW on-board charger. It also has a range of less than 100 miles, compared to the Fit's range of probably a lot more. That means with the LEAF you can drive less and spend more time filling up. And if you *do* run out of juice, you have to sit around waiting for a tow truck while my friend drives by, laughing and revving his engine. (This actually occurred. He sent me a picture.)

Obviously, the winner of this category depends on your lifestyle. As I was driving the 250 miles back from Nashville in a gas-powered Dodge Dart, I realized: in a LEAF, this four-hour trip would never be completed, because rural north Georgians do not have electricity. But how often do you make trips like that? For most Americans, the answer is virtually never. **Advantage: LEAF.** And possibly a nearby Enterprise Rent-a-Car location.

Styling

Debating the styling of economy cars is challenging because they all look roughly the same: like five-door eggs. In the LEAF's case, it's more like a five-door Easter egg, because all of them are that rather

dainty shade of light blue. The exception is my neighbor's LEAF, which is just a dull non-metallic black. Unfortunately, this returns us to "they all look the same."

Fortunately, the LEAF offers one highly distinctive styling characteristic: a very large sticker placed on the rear window of most units that says "WORLD CAR OF THE YEAR." Does the Fit have that? Hell no it doesn't, because it wasn't World Car of the Year. The LEAF was. For the sake of rear visibility, this may actually be a good thing. Still… **Advantage: LEAF**.

Windshield Wiper Normalcy

This is a hugely important category that's overlooked all too frequently in car reviews. Like most cars, the Honda Fit and Nissan LEAF have two windshield wipers. In the LEAF, they're about the same size. In the Fit, one wiper is the size of that tree in California you can drive under, while the other is about as long a golf course pencil. Why is this important? Because as a professional automotive journalist, I have deemed it so. Isn't that enough? **Advantage: LEAF.**

Pricing

The Honda Fit's pricing is very straightforward: a base model starts around $16,000 with shipping, while the Sport (hah!) is closer to $18,000. Easy.

The LEAF's pricing is a lot more complicated. Yes, it's true that a base-level LEAF starts around $29,500 with shipping. But to hear the Nissan people tell it, no one ever pays that. Instead, you take advantage of a federal tax credit, and then you take advantage of a state tax credit, and maybe there's a credit on the charger installation, and by the end of it, the government actually owes *you* five grand at six percent interest. **Advantage: LEAF.**

Conclusion

Obviously, the LEAF is far better than the Honda Fit in virtually every measurable category, from boring ones like pricing to the all-important "windshield wiper normalcy" game-changer. Surely, my LEAF-hating friend now agrees: the Fit is transportation. The LEAF is *revolution*. **Winner: LEAF**.

In a rare moment of seriousness, I must say: the LEAF isn't for

everyone. But if you go into it knowing that, it's much more acceptable. It's not a sports car. It's not a hauler. It's not for long trips. But it's really good at what it does, which happens to be what most people use a car for anyway. Driving the 2013 model, I was surprised at just how *normal* it felt - and that's a good thing. I didn't even need to take any Xanax.

32. The Rollover

Have you ever flipped a hundred-thousand-dollar luxury car onto its roof? Of course not. No one has. Except a senior citizen I once met after he climbed out of the twisted wreckage of his Audi A8 and walked up to me as if nothing happened.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, this story has everything: a rollover accident. An old person driving. An Audi A8. And *twisted wreckage*.

I remember the night vividly, which is unusual because the event happened in college. I don't remember *anything* from college vividly, except of course graduation, which is a joyous event that involves walking across the stage, shaking hands with the dean, and posing for a photo that will later be marketed to your family for $57.90. (Or you can get the *Don't You Love Your Son or Daughter? Package* for $112.30, which includes wallet sizes.)

But I remember this night vividly, because it's the only one in my entire college career that ended with a luxury car on its roof.

It was the last night before the last final exam of my sophomore year. If I recall correctly, the test was in Political Science, a class that I usually attended with my laptop so I could watch car videos. I had just finished studying, which meant that I had to move my car.

At this point, you're thinking: *Why did you have to move your car?* or possibly: *There isn't enough twisted wreckage, unless you count this story itself*. To the last point, I must say: why not include the whole book?

The reason I had to move the car is that no act in life is more difficult than parking on a college campus. Seriously: there are people out there who are, at this very moment, boring a hole through some large mountain in China to create a tunnel that will last until sometime next month when a giant earthquake destroys it, and if you called and asked how they're doing, they would say "It's very difficult, but at least we're not in America trying to park a car on a college campus."

This is because everything is either a loading zone, or parking for professors, or for graduate students, or for campus police, and you don't discover that until your car is towed and you owe $471 in fines. On this particular night, I had to move my car because I had parked somewhere nearby out of convenience and needed to return to my

usual parking space in the middle of nowhere before the morning. And it was on this drive that I encountered the A8.

It was a weekday around 1 a.m., which is not when you usually see an A8. No, A8s are usually spotted on dealership showrooms with giant "$5,000 OFF!" stickers on the windshield.

Of course, I'm kidding. The Audi A8 is a fine car driven by fine people, all of whom are tired of visiting the service department at their Mercedes dealership.

But very few of them drive around in the middle of the night. And more importantly, none of them drive around blaring opera music. That's right: as I pulled up next to the A8 at a stoplight, *the only thing I could hear* was opera music loudly coming from its speakers as if the A8 was an Escalade blasting music that I, as a white person, am not allowed to appreciate.

I wish I could explain this in adequate terms, but it's impossible to describe how loud this music was. When I stopped next to the A8, it really felt like I was standing on the stage at some opera performance where the singers were told, in no uncertain terms, that they would be judged solely on their volume.

Even stranger, the Audi's windows *were all completely closed*. So as clearly as I could make out the music from my car, this guy probably heard it like one of those annoying motorcycles that always seem to drive by as you're enjoying a nice meal on an outdoor patio.

But the A8 driver didn't seem too concerned, primarily because he was too busy conducting. Seriously: the guy inside – who was probably 70 years old – was enthusiastically conducting the opera as he listened. And I don't mean he was making simple hand motions. He had his entire body into it: his arms and shoulders and head all moving with the music like he was Leonard Bernstein doing an encore at the New York Philharmonic.

Because I was so enthralled by all of this, I didn't notice when the light turned green. But the A8 driver did, and he took off as fast as possible.

Now, at this point, I probably should've considered my final exam the next day. I probably should've remembered that I was just moving my car from one garage to another, and that I needed sleep. But I didn't.

Instead, inside my completely logical 19-year-old mind, all I could think was: *I've got to follow this guy and see what happens!*

So I did, and this is what happened: first, he drove fast. Then, he drove *faster*. Then he drove down a dark, curvy road, taking each turn so fast that he – a 70-year-old opera enthusiast – was easily losing me, a spry young man with a lifetime of high-speed driving knowledge gained from the *Gran Turismo* series. *How could this be?*

The answer is: it couldn't. That was proven just a few seconds later when I came around a corner to find the A8 sitting on its top.

Now, folks, a normal rollover is an unusual occurrence. But rolling an A8 is nearly impossible. There are just too many sensors that measure things like wheel speed, and engine speed, and whether the car is in the presence of a hippopotamus, and they can adjust for everything to ensure you cannot, under any circumstances, crash.

The opera guy had not only crashed, but he had *rolled over*. I called the police, gave the dispatcher my location, and sat in momentary disbelief.

As I was about to check on the driver, I noticed some movement coming from the car. In a matter of seconds, the 70-plus-year-old opera lover, who had been furiously conducting his CD player just moments before, *climbed out the passenger window of the overturned car* like a stunt driver on a James Bond set. I was stunned. He was completely unharmed, and – after getting up from the ground – he walked towards my car.

"What *happened?"* I asked incredulously.

"Well," he replied, calmly glancing at the A8, "I guess I fucked it up."

Those were his opening lines. Here was an elderly man that just survived a rollover accident in a six-figure luxury car, and his only explanation was – without batting an eyelash – *I guess I fucked it up.*

There was no guessing about it. The car was destroyed, a tangled heap of twisted wreckage (there it is!), completely smashed on the side of the road. He hit a few recycling bins as he rolled, so cans were strewn all over a nearby lawn. One wheel was still spinning. Steam poured from the engine bay. Our conversation continued:

“I called the police,” I said.

“That’s good,” he replied.

At this point, I couldn’t hold back and incredulously asked: *“How are you OK?”* The reply was his simplest yet. “Well,” he announced as a crowd of nightgown-wearing neighbors started to assemble, “It’s an Audi.”

Days later, a college friend who worked for the campus EMT service told me the A8 driver admitted to downing 11 drinks before getting behind the wheel. Apparently, if you’re an old guy on a bender, your car of choice is Audi, your music of choice is opera, and your profession of choice is conductor.

I sometimes drive past the spot where it happened, and I still see the scrape on the curb from where he launched his car into the air. Whenever I do, I can only think of one thing: *I guess I fucked it up.* Surely, Bernstein would’ve been more eloquent.

33. 2011 BMW 1-Series M – Review

All jobs have their perks. Football referees, for example, get to travel around the country, stand in front of large crowds, and make incomprehensible hand motions while dressed like a zebra. This would be tremendously exciting if only they didn't have to constantly blow a whistle, which can lead to deafness, or at least some sort of mouth infection.

Working for Porsche also had its share of highlights. In your mind, this probably involves enjoying the cars in their natural habitats: the Boxster on a twisty road; the 911 on a race track; the Cayenne in a private school carpool line. But really, it was more like this:

November 2009: The copy machine only broke once this month. The event is to be celebrated with brightly colored paper hats. As we're copying them, the copy machine breaks.
June 2010: IT announcement: *Next month, the entire office will be upgraded to Microsoft Excel 2007.*
March 2012: The entire office is upgraded to Microsoft Excel 2007.

But occasionally we had an actual perk, like the time I got to spend a few days testing out a BMW 1-Series M for "competitive analysis." (In other words: I promised my boss I'd stop taking two-hour lunches.) I'm sure you've already heard a lot about the 1M, but I've decided to provide my take anyway. Because let's be honest: you can never get too much 1-Series M. Especially if you're a BMW dealer.

We start this review with a disclaimer: I am not a BMW fanboy. I know what you're thinking: *Of course you are! You write about cars! You must be a BMW fanboy!* And it's true: most car writers love BMW – a fact they demonstrate with sentences like: *The 2004 6-Series is eye candy from all angles.* These words actually appeared in the January 2004 issue of *Motor Trend*, presumably following a conference call with BMW's PR department.

But I'm more of a Mercedes guy. I've owned four and I keep buying them, no matter how many times the service manager calls and says: "I've got some bad news."

With that settled, on to the 1-Series M. Let's start with styling: the 1-Series looks like a shoe. This is an indisputable fact, sort of like how all of Audi's sedans look like all of Audi's other sedans, or how all of Honda's sedans look like all of Honda's sedans from three years ago.

It can be said, then, that – with a bodykit, big wheels, and a wider track – the 1-Series M looks more like one of those brightly-colored running shoes worn by the kind of people who jog in place when they're waiting to cross the street.

Inside, the 1-Series M loses its shoeish qualities and instead takes on the persona of an automobile. A very fuzzy automobile. That's because every surface in a 1-Series M is covered in Alcantara, which is a wonderful, soft material that remains both wonderful and soft for approximately seven weeks, unless you touch it, in which case it's more like seven hours. Still, Alcantara seating is a welcome departure from most BMWs, which boast "leatherette" upholstery even if you spend $74,000 and order every single option.

But nothing I've said above matters. (One could argue that nothing I've said in *any* previous article matters, but that's a conversation I'll have later when my parents call and demand that I get a real job.)

The reason none of this matters is because you're not thinking about shoes or Alcantara when you're driving a 1-Series M. Instead, you're thinking: *This is the best thing in the history of time.* Or possibly: *This car is so good that maybe the 2004 6-Series actually was eye candy from every angle!* In other words: the 1-Series M turns you insane.

Other thoughts consist primarily of the word "perfect," especially if you're referring to the steering, handling, shifter, or acceleration. (This might be a good time to remind you that I'm not a BMW

fanboy.)

If you're a car journalist, you're also thinking up sentences like: *The 1-Series M is balanced exactly right, taking on turns with tremendous precision and poise*. This is because car writers are required, by law, to use those "precision" and "poise" in every review. The exception is if they're writing about the Range Rover, in which case they must use the words "fire" and "risk."

The 1-Series M is also exactly the right length, unlike its larger M brethren, which currently range in size from "Giant Redwood" to "Upcoming Dubai Skyscraper." And there's just enough engine power to make you smile, but not so much that they'll still be finding pieces of you months after the accident.

In other words, the 1-Series M really is *that* good. It handles like a mid-engine car despite being front-engined, and it gives you a strong sense of ownership pride despite being orange. But for all its good traits, the 1-Series M has one seriously bad one: the price. Two years later, it's *still* trading over sticker, with the average seller asking more than $63,000 on AutoTrader.com.

That means it's better to find a friend with a 1-Series M and ask if you can borrow it. Or, you can just go work for Porsche. I hear they're thinking of upgrading to Excel 2010.

34. The Perfect Range Rover

I've recently completed my quest to find the perfect Range Rover. Initially, I thought this was an impossible task. You probably do too. You're probably sitting there thinking: *There's no such thing as the perfect Range Rover! Even new ones are a bigger fire risk than old people who forget to turn off their space heaters when they leave the condo to play bridge!*

And, I admit, most of that is true. New ones break down a lot. Used ones break down even more, and also give you the feeling that they're about to collapse into a thousand tiny pieces, each of which contains a likeness of Churchill. But I've purchased an absolutely perfect one, and I'm going to explain how I did it.

To start, a little clarity. When I talk about the perfect Range Rover, I am not referring to the 1995 model I owned for three long months during which I called AAA more often than I called my parents. That one was far from perfect, in part due to the terrible driving dynamics, but also because I was afraid to drive it more than 11 miles away from a well-trained and very patient mechanic.

Instead, I'm talking about a newer model I purchased for a variety of highly rational reasons. And since I'm going to be a little hard on the Range Rover in this story, I've decided to share those reasons with you. They are: I have no idea. You see, I've *always* loved the Range Rover, from the very moment I first laid eyes on one in a parking lot and was told by its owner: "Hey kid, get out of here. I could buy your whole family!" But I've never been able to explain why, and I suspect most Range Rover owners can't, primarily because they're currently on the phone with a towing company.

Anyway, on to the story of how I bought the perfect Range Rover.

It all started when I was browsing for Range Rovers while thinking: *I love these things, but I can't buy one, because I will never be able to leave home with a reasonable assurance that I can get back again.* And that's when I discovered a 2006 model for sale at CarMax.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with CarMax, allow me to paint you a picture. Of course, I will not actually be painting a picture, as my creative skills begin and end with writing. This is probably why I like the Range Rover: because it's shaped like a box.

Here's how it *usually* works when you're searching for a used car: you drive to a random used car lot, usually located in the part of town where people put bars over their windows. The car costs $15,000, but some negotiating can get it to $12,000, and you can usually convince the salesman to throw in illegal narcotics. It's a great world, the used car business.

Here's how it works at CarMax: you go to a CarMax location, where the vehicles mostly consist of aging American cars in colors that could only sell to a rental car firm. The same car that was $15,000 at the used car dealer is $18,000 at CarMax, and you're not allowed to haggle. Also, the value of your trade-in is largely dependent on how much gas is in the tank.

So I generally stay away from CarMax. But as I checked out their website, I discovered the CarMax fleet is a little more enticing than I realized. Yes, there were a few Chevys painted in non-metallic colors that went into development during the 1970s and were only just approved by GM's bureaucracy. But they also had some high-end models from BMW, Audi, Mercedes, Porsche, and – most importantly – Land Rover.

I was intrigued, but pricing was still too high. I was about to leave CarMax's website when I noticed three policies that ensure I will purchase every single one of my used cars there for as long as I live, or at least until they change the policies, which – now that I am aware of them – may be only a few weeks. They are:

1. Five-day return policy. CarMax claims to have a policy that allows you to bring a car back after five days for a full refund. That's not so strange, as similar policies are available at a few dealers, though probably not the ones that also provide drugs. But here's the kicker: at CarMax, the policy includes *unlimited mileage*. I pictured buying a BMW M5 on a Friday, taking it to the dragstrip that night, and returning it Saturday morning.

2. Vehicle shipping. CarMax will ship any vehicle from any one of its stores to any other store for about half the retail shipping rate. They'll also ship vehicles within a few hundred miles for free. Now I pictured finding a BMW M5 in Charlotte, shipping it to Atlanta, buying it on a Friday, taking it to the dragstrip that night, and returning it Saturday morning.

3. Warranties. This is by far the most important CarMax policy: they will sell a warranty on any vehicle in their inventory. More importantly, they will sell a *six-year, bumper-to-bumper* warranty on any vehicle in their inventory. Now I pictured finding a BMW M5 in Charlotte, shipping it to Atlanta, buying it on a Friday, and keeping it for approximately six years, because how the hell are you going to find a warranty like that on an M5?

Yes, the sports cars were tempting. But I wanted a Range Rover. So I went in to look at the 2006.

I arrived at the CarMax and was immediately greeted by … no one. That's because it's CarMax policy not to pressure you into anything, including actually taking a look at the vehicles. You could stand in the parking lot all day consuming the narcotics you got from CarMax's rival dealer while the sales staff looks on and quietly whispers things like: *"I wonder how much gas is in his trade-in."*

But I did go inside. That's where I met a salesman whose nametag said something like Kwazotunde, except with more accents, and probably an X. He introduced himself as John.

John and I went out to look at the Range Rover, which appeared to be in fairly nice condition, as indicated by the fact that it was not currently on fire. We got inside, started it, and took it for a test drive. This was promising. It drove well, everything seemed to be working, and at no point during the drive did John attempt to sell me drugs, or anything really.

When we got back to CarMax, John told me to sit in his office, which was really just a desk in the middle of the showroom. Using his computer, he pulled up the real reason I was there: warranty information. And that's when CarMax won a customer for life.

You see, while my Range Rover was slightly more expensive than it would be at a typical dealer, I still think it was a good deal. That's because I paid just over $3,000 for a bumper-to-bumper warranty that spanned *six years* and a whopping 67,000 miles. It even covers the air suspension, which is well known to break if you ever attempt to do anything crazy with your Range Rover, like drive it.

Land Rover, it should be noted, is not willing to sell this kind of warranty at any point during the life of its vehicles. Not when they're new, not when they're certified pre-owned, and certainly not when

they're six years old, like this one. I signed the paperwork the next day.

At this point, some of you might be thinking: *You paid $3,000 for an extended warranty? You're crazy!* And if you're thinking this, you have certainly never owned a British car.

For proof: just a few weeks later, I went to the dealer for an oil change. This involved, among other things, sitting in an overstuffed leather chair in the dealer waiting room, which had a TV tuned to the BBC. It was as if they were shoving their Britishness in my face, stopping just short of reminding me about all of the wonderful things that were invented by the English, such as the sausage roll.

Anyway, as I sat there, wondering why the hell the British insist on making television dramas about the 1700s, my service advisor approached.

"Mr. DeMuro, I have some bad news," she said, in a somber tone, as if she was a veterinarian announcing that my pet chicken had just been eaten by another customer's pet dog and the only keepsake was this feather she was about to hand me. "Your radiator is leaking, and your suspension…"

At this point, I stopped listening, largely because I know nothing about my suspension other than that it a) exists, and b) actually, that is all I know about my suspension.

"Land Rover Woman," I replied (admittedly, I didn't actually call her this, I called her by her name, but if I check the dealer's website to find out what her name is I'll be lost on the Internet for hours, and I have dinner plans), "This isn't a problem. I have a warranty."

"Great! Just bring in your warranty details and we'll get you squared away!"

And so, a few days later, I returned with my warranty details. A few days after that, Land Rover Woman called to confirm that my car was ready. My total cost was the warranty deductible: fifty bucks. The warranty had covered the remainder, which amounted to more than $1,600. In other words: in just three weeks, my six-year warranty already paid for half of itself.

Although I encouraged Land Rover Woman to find *more* problems, she

was honest and said it didn't need anything else. But, ladies and gentlemen, it's a Land Rover. It won't be long before it needs something else. And when it does, I'll have CarMax to back me up.

Sure, it may have some miles on it, and there may be a scratch or two. But my Range Rover really is perfect, because I can drive it without worrying. And how many Range Rover owners can say that? None. They're all busy threatening little kids who get too close.

35. What It's Like to Own an E63 AMG Wagon

The Mercedes E63 AMG Wagon is loved by Mercedes-Benz and journalists alike. Journalists love it because, by virtue of simply *being* a journalist, there is a requirement to love fast wagons. This dates back to the days of the Oregon Trail, when journalists would hitch a really fast ox to the front of a Conestoga wagon and write about how it was great, but it'd be better if it were a diesel.

Meanwhile, Mercedes-Benz loves the E63 AMG Wagon because it allows them to put the E-Class in front of journalists. If not for the E63 AMG Wagon, journalists asked to take an E-Class press car would politely decline, reminding the Mercedes-Benz PR office that they don't work for the AARP Magazine. (In the next issue: Does the E-Class have enough room for an orthopedic exercise ball? We investigate.)

The problem is that once journalists spend a few days in the E63 AMG Wagon, they inevitably give it back and it's sold to someone who should probably be arrested for child endangerment. Indeed, beyond a few short reviews, we rarely hear any more about the zenith of the fast station wagon. But have you ever wondered what it's like to live with an E63 AMG Wagon?

I did. So I bought one. And I'll say this: It's awesome.

There's already a lot about my E63 Wagon in this book. So rather than write a detailed review, I'll take you through a typical day during the period in my life when I owned a 507-horsepower station wagon with rear-facing child seats.

8:15 a.m.: Wake up. This would usually be a problem, since I live 15 miles from work and have to be in by 9. But remember: I have an E63 AMG Wagon.

8:30 a.m.: Get gas. The tank was empty because I used the car the prior night to visit my girlfriend, who lives four miles away.

8:45 a.m.: Arrive at work 20 minutes early. If any Atlanta-area police officers read Jalopnik, this isn't because I broke any laws. Traffic just happened to be light. Especially on the shoulder.

8:50 a.m.: Enter elevator. I worked at Porsche's corporate headquarters. An executive steps in behind me. "What are you driving these days, Doug?" My response prompts a head nod and an unspoken *"What the hell are we paying this guy?"*

Noon: Go for lunch. My colleagues pile into the AMG Wagon. Two think it's funny sit in the rear-facing third row. Unfortunately, putting adults back there is like Hakeem Olajuwon doing push-ups in the parcel shelf of an SL550. Despite the space restrictions, they ride in back anyway. Because when was the last time you got to sit in a rear-facing third row?

1 p.m.: Return from lunch. Pull up at a stop light next to an E63 AMG sedan. The driver glances over, then returns to his phone conversation. Ahh, AMG camaraderie.

6:30 p.m.: Leave work. Meet up with friends to visit the quarter-mile Atlanta Dragway an hour from the city in rural Commerce, Georgia. On the way, stop for gas. Again. No one says anything about my car. This is contrary to when I owned a Lotus, and men would walk up to excitedly tell me about the time their sister's husband's mom owned a Corvette in 1987.

7:30 p.m.: Arrive at dragstrip. During second run, fuel is low again. Stop for gas about an eighth-mile down the strip. Still run a 14.

8:30 p.m.: Everyone who was making fun of "the station wagon" now loves it. Except for the guy in the '69 Camaro with slicks who keeps

losing to it. He gets especially mad when a friend rides in the wagon's rear-facing third row and waves to him as we pull away.

9:30 p.m.: Leave dragstrip. In the parking lot, the wagon's "check engine" light goes on. The navigation screen flickers. Tomorrow, I'll visit the dealership, where I'll be subject to a $1,500 repair bill. But first, I have to get gas.

36. 2006 Lotus Elise – Review

If you're like me, you've probably wondered what it's like to own a Lotus. (Also: your diet is 80 percent Cheetos.) You know it's true. You've seen pictures. You've read reviews. You've encountered Lotuses on the road and thought: *When that guy goes driving, where does he put his legs?*

Of course, you've also thought: *That looks like fun!* But you've never owned one, largely because you don't want to get angrily stuck in traffic behind one of those "big SUVs" that "everyone is buying," which you later realize is a Camry.

Plus, it's way cheaper just to read stories from guys like me, who a) owned a Lotus, and b) survived. In fact, there's a story elsewhere in this book about the time I drove my Lotus across the United States. I highly recommend reading the story provided you have an entire weekend, as it's very long and uses words like "assertion."

But that story doesn't really dive into the Lotus's automotive abilities, except to say that driving across the country isn't one of them. And so, dear readers, I've decide to review my former Elise for those of you who insist on knowing what owning a Lotus is like.

Some Background

Most of us car writers like this section. It gives us, the seasoned automotive journalist, a chance to explain to you, the pathetically uninformed reader, everything we've learned about this particular vehicle from the automaker PR staff that's currently paying for our hotel rooms. This is how reviews end up with lines like: "The all-new Acura RLX looks like a majestic eagle soaring onto a mountain searching for its prey," when in fact the all-new Acura RLX actually looks like an airport taxi.

Of course, I'm mostly kidding. (Not about the Acura RLX: it really does look like an airport taxi.) The real reason we like this section is because it allows us to pad our word counts. That means we can soon go downstairs and get in the hotel pool, which the automaker PR staff has graciously turned up to 87 degrees.

None of that, you should know, is true of Lotus. That's because Lotus doesn't *have* a PR staff, and if they did, they'd have us staying at a

Days Inn. This is clear when you look at the cars in dealerships, where the window stickers are handwritten.

Anyway: at this point, I suppose I should say something about my actual Lotus. So here it is: like all 2006 Elises, mine had a six-speed manual and a 190-horsepower four-cylinder built by Toyota. Also, mine was orange, which I suspect comes from a subconscious desire to replicate an actual Cheeto. And now, a review.

Exterior

The Elise's exterior is its strongest asset. That's because the styling makes the Elise seem like a junior Lamborghini when it is, in fact, more like a senior 1/18 scale model.

Really: my Elise cost something like $30,000, but nearly everyone who approached me asked if it was an exotic car. The problem was, after learning it isn't an exotic, people respond with: *"Oh. Who makes Lotus?"* This is always said in a disappointed tone, like those Antiques Roadshow contestants who bring in an item they believe to be Franklin Roosevelt's dentures only to discover it is, in fact, a pet rock.

Interior

I'm not going to beat around the bush, largely because I have no idea what that actually would entail. Instead, I'll make it simple: the Elise has a really basic interior.

At this point, I can practically hear the clicking of keys from Lotus owners who are angrily writing to tell me that the Elise's interior is *not* basic, it's *functional*, and by God the Acura RLX actually looks like a large SUV.

And they're right that the cabin is functional. That's because it has everything it must have, such as seats, but it includes absolutely no frills. I am certain of this because I owned my Lotus for about six months, and I still have no idea what a frill is.

Here are some examples of how basic the cabin is:

1. There's no storage anywhere. OK, fine, there's a very small shelf behind the seats where you might put, say, a legal pad. And there's a small cubby between the seats, which could, in theory, hold a severed human thumb. (But not *two* severed human thumbs. Consider that as

you examine your weedwhacker closely.) But there isn't room for something really enormous, like a cell phone.

2. The entire interior is mainly comprised of things that are smaller than they should be. For example: the steering wheel is about the same size as a salad bowl. Also, the seats were apparently derived from those brightly colored chairs you see in second-grade classrooms. They have similar padding.

3. Once, when I was driving, some plastic fell off the B-pillar. For those who haven't experienced this (In other words: those of you who have never driven a late-1990s Ford Taurus), it's a bizarre feeling. You're moving along and suddenly, without warning, part of your car is sitting in your lap.

But I can get past all of this. What I *can't* get past is the aluminum shift knob. Here's what happens: it's a warm day. You're excited to drive your cool convertible sports car. So you jump in, turn on the car, reach for first gear, and immediately suffer searing pain from the aluminum gear lever that's been sitting in the sun all day. This causes your hand to fall off, and you can't take it to the emergency room to get it reattached because the storage cubby is only big enough for a thumb.

Driving Experience

As you might expect, the Lotus offered a tremendous driving experience. Unfortunately, I didn't get much time to enjoy it. That's because Elise was the most fragile car I've ever owned, which is an impressive feat considering that I have, on several occasions, purchased used Mercedes products.

Dozens of incredibly minor things broke during my time with the Elise. This included the exhaust, which somehow became detached from the frame. There was also the time a stick in the road and took a chunk out of the Elise's fiberglass body. *A stick.*

Admittedly, on those rare days when the Elise was at 100 percent, it drove really well. There are two reasons for that: one is the ridiculously quick unassisted steering, which gives you some insight into how a fly lives. There's also the power delivery, which reminds me of scrolling down in Microsoft Excel: *nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, A LOT!!!!*

But I never did shake the feeling that the Lotus was too fragile. Its final straw came late one night as I was enjoying some back roads. After 20 minutes of fun, I came upon a drunk SUV driver who hit a mailbox and kept driving, destroying her tire, wheel and brake disc. I realized a few minutes earlier, she could've hit me – and given the Elise's build quality, I didn't imagine that would end well. I had fun with the Elise, but I found it to be a little too delicate.

Conclusion

In the end, I believe the Elise is the perfect third car. One daily driver, one fun sports car, and one Lotus, which is a track toy and little else. Hardcore Lotus owners – a group that's only slightly less vocal than the NRA – will disagree, and probably write angry letters. But these days, I'm happy to be the one in the larger car rather than the one trying to avoid it. And I'm *really* happy that I can carry around more than a severed thumb and a legal pad.

37. Off-Roading in a Range Rover Classic

For a true car enthusiast, few things can top the allure of an old British car. The style. The uniqueness. The allure of wind-in-your-hair motoring, even if you don't have a convertible.

Of course, most car enthusiasts stay far away from British cars, unless "car enthusiast" is your weekend hobby and "firefighter" is your day job. That's because old British cars tend to catch on fire, assuming you can get them started in the first place. Or, at least, that's their reputation. I didn't really buy it, which led me to purchase possibly the ultimate old British car: a 1995 Range Rover Classic.

Now, 1995 may *sound* new compared to, say, a '66 MGB, which allows the same amount of rainwater to reach the cabin whether the top is up or down. But it's important to remember that the Range Rover Classic was developed in the 1970s. Back then, most problems at Solihull were addressed with *"Good enough!"* which was a common battle cry of the entire British automobile industry that eventually resulted in its complete and utter collapse.

Unfortunately, my Range Rover Classic held true to its reputation, as I've documented elsewhere in this book. But for one glorious afternoon, I was able to enjoy it precisely where it was born to drive. No, I'm not talking about the Hamptons. I mean a series of challenging off-road trails located very close to a skilled mechanic.

It was a Saturday morning when I took the Range Rover off-roading with my friends Andrew and Sam. (Yes, the same Andrew and Sam from the dragstrip story. They're obviously crazy.) Our preferred

trails are found in a rather dangerous, gritty neighborhood near Atlanta, the exact location of which I will keep secret for fear of discovery by the police, or worse: hipsters.

The journey began with a steep drop into a valley comprised of 20 percent trees, 20 percent dirt, and 60 percent discarded trash. The terrain would be no problem in a modern Range Rover equipped with a fancy console-mounted switch for hill descent control, which functions primarily to absorb Starbucks spills from suburban housewives. But old ones don't have that fancy crap: they have brakes. And bad ones.

As a result, a firm push on the brakes as I descended the hill meant the Rover crawled along at approximately the speed you might go on a rural interstate in the middle of the night. Andrew and Sam were terrified by this and got out the moment we reached the bottom, continuing a tried-and-true off-roader tradition: first drive over something, then look at it. (Grunting in admiration of your accomplishment is optional, but suggested.)

We inspected the land, which primarily involved looking into the distance and trying to avoid stepping on empty beer bottles. Fortunately, we could tell the hipsters still hadn't discovered the area, since it wasn't craft beer.

We got back in the Range Rover and drove towards some dirt ruts that were several feet high. Since my Rover had been converted from its factory air suspension to more reliable springs, we couldn't raise its ground clearance to go over them. Instead, we just crossed our fingers and slowly took on rut after rut. Although no words were exchanged, we were all silently praying that nothing scraped the underbody, which – in the infinite wisdom of the 1970s Brits – probably contained most of the Rover's essential components.

But we cleared the ruts unscathed, arriving next at another steep hill. This time, the hill's angle looked too severe to attempt directly. Instead, we decided to take an alternate route which involved driving over a tree. For the environmentalists reading this, a quick aside: during my entire time owning the vehicle, I *averaged* about 11 miles per gallon. The tree should be the least of your concerns.

And it was the least of ours, as the Range Rover ambled over it with ease, then (quickly) down the hill. At the bottom, we once again got out to survey the manly thing we had just accomplished. Happily, the

tree had already sprung right back into its normal place among the trash.

After the hill came a wide open, flat section covered with brush, which the Range Rover again tackled with ease. While that may sound obvious, remember: we're still talking about a British car. I had visited these same trails months earlier in an old Toyota Land Cruiser, which inspired tremendous confidence. With the Range Rover, the thinking was more along the lines of: *This is really cool, and I can't wait until it's over.*

Next up was a small pond surrounded by trees, which provided a very picturesque setting, provided you could get over the smell. Fortunately, this wasn't the smell of a British car on fire, but rather standing water that was probably infested with snakes who ate the people responsible for the beer bottles. After taking the necessary photos to remember our trip – this involved plugging our noses – we left the area and quickly found ourselves mired in a forest.

While this event is probably starting to sound like a *Lord of the Rings* saga, the forest eventually gave way to a clearing that led us back to paved roads. The Range Rover had survived its off-road excursion. We breathed a collective sigh of relief until we remembered: it still had to get us home. And none of us had a fire extinguisher.